

Exodus 14: 19-31
Matthew 18: 21-35
September 14, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Last week I took as my text the first verse of today's reading. Apparently a fellow disciple has said or done something to injure Peter. He wants to know how many times he must forgive the one who has hurt him. The standard for the time was seven times. After that the offended one had performed his duty to the law and get on with his or her life. But Jesus surprises Peter by answering that he should not forgive just seven times but seventy-seven times. By this he means that forgiveness is a spiritual journey that is not over until forgiveness happens.

Jesus understood what psychologists have noticed for decades. The cost of carrying the wounds others have inflicted on us in many cases far exceeds the wrong we have suffered. In many cases, if not most, the one who has hurt us does not dwell on what he or she has said or done. Yet we still carry the hurt, anger, resentment and desire for revenge. Studies in neuropsychology demonstrate that when we experience personal trauma the wires in our brains to fuse. The event and the anguish of the event wire together. The result is that when a similar trauma occurs, even if it is a mild form of the trauma, our brain immediately connects with the original painful event. We respond therefore not to the latest incident alone; but we experience the collective fear and suffering of all related wounds we have experienced over time. In some cases the result is an overwhelming tidal wave of emotion that renders us helpless. The ones who inflict the pain on us are completely unaware and often unconcerned about our reaction. Others who do not know our story may think that we are "overreacting."

Sometimes the one who has deeply hurt us is dead. Yet their words and actions continue to scar our daily lives. Forgive seven times? According to Jesus, not if we want to be free of the pain and be released to live as healed, whole people. Remember that in Greek the word “forgive” means to release without any desire or ability to take back. Seven times? I think not! Seventy-seven times? Not in my experience.

In fact, as I listen to Jesus, I do not think forgiveness is something we *do*. I may say, “I forgive you;” but what I really mean is, “Please don’t hurt me anymore; or, I’ll say anything to make things normal again; or, oh, what you did is really ok, I probably deserved it.” Of course many of us have been taught that forgiving is “the Christian thing to do.” And so by forgiving you when I still hurt and carry all the fear and anger inside of me, I compound the suffering by feeling guilty that, by harboring this ongoing pain in my soul I am being a bad Christian.

Jesus sees the terrible price we pay when we internalize the wounds of someone’s aggressive and unloving behavior toward us. No one knows this better than victims of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Jesus sees that, unrecognized and not brought into the light of day and the light of God’s love such experiences have a corrosive effect on our lives which robs us of the joy of living.

But Jesus recognizes that the effects of not being able to forgive go far beyond the individual. As much as Jesus cared for each individual human being, his overriding concern was the healing of the entire human community—what he called the Kingdom of God. Note that the focus of Peter’s question has to do with another disciple, what the New Revised Standard Version calls “a member of the church.” Jesus’ response is not just about the lifting of the pain from Peter’s soul and his reconciliation with the “brother”; it is about the health of the

community. I am continually surprised and disturbed when I hear someone say of another member, "I don't speak to him or her. Fifteen years ago he or she said..." Or my husband/wife/son/daughter/neighbor doesn't come here because someone said..." Far more frequent and tragic is my experience of people who have stopped being disciples altogether because of some thoughtless, unloving thing that was said or done, often in the name of Jesus.

It must be said that forgiveness is not always about forgiving someone else. It is often equally difficult to forgive ourselves. Speaking personally, I am far more likely to beat myself up over stupid, thoughtless and inappropriate things I have said and done than I am to hold on to hurts done unto me. Time and perspective ease the scars of adolescence and schoolyard injustice. But I am still occasionally tormented by past hurtful actions toward others. Most of these people I have not seen for many years and I don't even know where they are or if they are still living. Now translate that to a community of faith made up of people who are hurt and angry with one another or, guilty and regretful of hurt done to others and unable receive forgiveness.

You can see why Jesus will not put a limit on formal statements of forgiveness. The stakes are too high. In a world riddled with age old hatreds and rigid ideas of justice; in communities ripped apart by violence, nations consumed by political and ideological polarization; families burdened by secrets and damaging interpersonal conflict there is a literally crying need for communities of forgiveness. There is a desperate need for communities who recognize the terrible price we pay for being captives to our wounds. Where is the setting where we can come and lay down our burdens? Where can we go where we can feel safe enough to admit our hurt and anger toward one who has scarred us and to seek healing and

reconciliation? Where is the place where we who are burdened by our guilt and shame over our mistreatment of others can find a way to make amends and to find peace?

The Gospel proclaims that the our healing and reconciliation lie not in a place but in a person, a human being named Jesus of Nazareth whose very life is the ultimate reference point for healing and reconciliation. The Gospel proclaims that in his life, death and resurrection Jesus declares on single truth: *we are forgiven!* As far as the love of God goes there is nothing that separates us from his love. In Jesus Christ God has declared peace with the world. It is we who fail to receive and live that peace who continue the hatred and violence in the world.

There in a nutshell is the meaning of the parable of the unforgiving servant. His debt was forgiven but he did not take the forgiveness into his heart. He was not grateful for the great act of mercy and failed to pass on the gift.

The journey of forgiveness begins when you and I take our eyes off of the hurt we have received at the hands of others or have caused others and instead lift up our eyes to the Savior through whom comes the tender yet resolute unconditional love of God. The experience of forgiveness begins when we are far more impressed with the merciful forgiveness we have received through Jesus than the hurt the world has brought to us—or that we in our woundedness have brought to the world. When we daily cultivate the awareness that the love of God so immense and touches every aspect of our lives we will begin to know that great lifting of heart which is the peace of Christ. It will become our first purpose in life in all of our relationships to be vehicles of that peace to the world around us. Amen.