

SLD09.14.08 24th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 18:21-35
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Don’t Forgive Too Soon”

So, you get it, right? This is not a subtle passage. Somebody sins against us, we’re supposed to forgive ‘em. And not just once, Jesus tells Peter. Not just seven times, but seventy seven times! Or, depending on your translation, seven *times* seventy times.

And why are we supposed to keep on forgiving like that? Because God forgives us...again and again and again - a whole lot more than seven times seventy times.

But forgiveness can be hard. Sometimes even impossible for us. So every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer here at Emory Church, as we ask for God to forgive us our sins, we ask also for God’s help for us as we forgiving those who sin against us.

(Heads up, visitors. Here at this church we don’t mess with “trespasses” or fool with Presbyterian “debt” in the Lord’s Prayer; here at Emory we go right for the tarnished gold of “sin.”)

What we believe is that before God *all* of us are sinners. Not only does Calvin say so, but you live long enough and so does your life. Yet in God’s mercy, tolerance and abundant love, God keeps on forgiving us – frankly, whether we ask for it or not. So you and I, we’re meant to echo, reflect, enflesh, if you will, in our own lives that kind of generosity of Spirit.

Somebody sins against us, we ought to forgive them Repeatedly. Endlessly. Ad infinitum. Ad nauseum. Jesus’ marching orders are clear.

But Jesus’ disciples tend to be thick-headed; Peter, more than most. So just in case he doesn’t quite get it yet, Jesus offers an illustrative tale.

Scene 1. There's a king who's settling up accounts with his slaves, who owe him. See anything wrong with that picture?

Anyway, the King's slaves are apparently indebted to him for more than their indenture. One owed him ten thousand talents. Have you any idea how much ten thousand talents is? I hadn't. It's the equivalent of more than 15 years wages! Fifteen years of slave labor!

Needless to say, the slave couldn't cough that kind of money – the system's probably set up that way – I mean, why would a slave owe that much money in the first place except to meet living expenses? It's not like he'd have a lot of spare time for gambling or lush travel. In any case, because he can't pay his "debt," the king orders him and his family to be sold to satisfy it. Probably a routine economic arrangement.

The slave falls on his knees and begs the king to be patient with him, he'll pay back the debt over time in installments. Well, no way the slave could have paid back that debt if he worked for the rest of his life. But the king must have been in a generous mood, because not only doesn't he sell the slave and his family, not only doesn't he decline the installment plan, he forgives the debt altogether!

Scene 2. The same slave goes out, all happy and forgiven, and comes across a friend of his who owes him a hundred denarii. Okay, a hundred denarii is no pittance, either; we're talking maybe the value of 100 days slave labor. But you know it's gotta be the king's money slave # 1 lent in the firstplace, and with interest, the scumbag.

In any case, of course 100 denarii is more slave #2 can come up with, so he falls on his knees and begs for the mercy of his (freshly forgiven) compadre.

And *that* mercy-laden wretch, fresh off his own knees, what does he do? (You can see I don't like the guy. Think I have an issue with forgiveness?) That first slave, so

generously treated by his master, he immediately forgives his friend's debt and blesses him on his way, right? Oh, no, he does not. Not only does the tight-fisted dirtwad refuse to forgive his fellow slave's debt, he has him dragged off to prison until he can pay it. (A practice that's never made much sense to me over the centuries – debtor's prison. I mean, how are you ever supposed to pay off your debt if you're in jail?)

Scene 3. The king catches wind of his slave's despicable behavior and in fury, has him hauled before the throne to yell at him: "You wicked slave! Because you pleaded with me, I forgave you all your debt! Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"

Now the king is mad and in a very *bad* mood. So he hands the slave over to be tortured until he could pay his entire debt (about as logical as debtor's prison, but you know how we are when we're mad.)

The curtain drops. Surely Peter's got the point by now, right? But just in case...I mean, he did ask the question...Jesus spells it out real loud and clear for him and all his disciples: "That's what God's going to do to every one of you, and me, if we don't forgive those who sin against us. Hand us over to be tortured until we have paid our entire debt!"

Don't you know Peter was sorry he'd asked the question? Don't you know his fellow disciples were, too? Heck, *I'm* sorry he asked the question. Do you know how hard it is *really* to forgive someone who's hurt you? I mean *really* hurt you, in a "you can never make that right" kind of way? I imagine most of you do.

But the story's pretty clear – God's the generous king who keeps forgiving us and we're the tight-fisted dirtwads who carry and nurture our grudges. So give it up, says Jesus. Shake off that righteous anger, says Jesus, and give people a break, even the

ones who really truly hurt you. Not just seven times but seventy-seven times, or ever how often is more than you want to. That's clear, right?

But understanding ain't doing, is it? I mean, often it's hard to forgive. I don't mean mouthing the words (forgive us our sin, as we forgive those who sin against us), I mean *really* forgiving, from your heart. Did you catch that at the end of Jesus' story? I'm pretty sure it was intentional. If you disciples don't forgive each other *from your heart*, he said, my heavenly Father will hand you over to be tortured until you *do* pay your debt.

Notice Jesus doesn't say that God will do the torturing if we don't forgive one another from the heart, but that we'll be *handed over* to be tortured. Who do you reckon is doing the torturing? I say it's our *own* sorry selves.

Ever carried a grudge? Ever stewed in your own slimy juices of anger or hurt or righteous outrage? Oh man, *I* have, as some of you know. Pleasant and loveable as I am, some of you have been really hurt or scared or confused by my fury. Have you ever hurt or scared or confused anyone you love by your fury? How do you feel afterwards? Not good. Not good, at all.

I say when we don't or can't forgive one another from the heart, God just lets us stew in our own injudicious juices.

Still, forgiveness, at least forgiveness from the heart...just doesn't always come all that easily, even to us noble Christians. In fact, remember that Peter's question was not about the Jews forgiving the tax collectors, or the Pharisees or the Holy Roman Empire but about forgiving another member of Peter's church! (Though, of course, it wasn't so much a "church" back then – there were no buildings or budgets or bulletins; just a random, rag-tag assembly of Jesus' followers.

So Peter's struggle wasn't so much about how to forgive archetypal bad guys, the kind everybody loves to hate, so much as how to forgive the people who get under your skin. Who annoy you, get in your way, always take the opposite side from you. Can you think of anybody like that? Or worse, who takes your side but always improves on it?

Or people whose voice is like sandpaper on your eardrum, or whose glare makes you feel suddenly like a misbehaving schoolgirl, or whose expectations, you are continuously reminded, you can simply never meet? How many times do I have to forgive *them*? asks Peter. And we all know the answer.

But from the heart, now, that's asking a lot. Maybe even the impossible.

So I'm down at my retreat center for an associates' gathering last week and I come across this book the title of which gives me this sigh of relief. It's called *Don't Forgive Too Soon* and I almost don't even care what it says inside. After weeks of chewing on this self-evident scripture with its sometimes threatening, sometimes distastefully pious message of continuously forgiving everyone you most can't stand, it's somehow refreshing just to read the words "*don't forgive*" for a change. Or at least, don't forgive too soon, like maybe it's not supposed to be so automatic for everybody. As if, when somebody's mean to me, I'm not required to just grin and bear it, or make some self-betraying pious choice to forgive somebody I really want to punch out.

Don't forgive too soon. I don't know, I found the words encouraging, even sort of forgiving in and of themselves. The kind of self-forgiveness that lets you take a deep breath, and be refreshed by it.

So I bought the book, just for the title. I even read some of it. It's by three Catholics (when *Catholics* suggest not moving too quickly to forgiveness, I say we ought

to listen.) These three Catholics – the Linns – I’ve read before. They’re all related somehow – I think Dennis and Matthew are brothers and Sheila is somebody’s wife. Whoever’s wife she is not, is a Jesuit priest. Anyway, the Linns write books from time to time that, in my view, push the envelope of biblical interpretation a little closer toward grace.

And what the Linns say is “forgive those who sin against you,” sure enough, but just not too soon. Because in order genuinely to forgive *from the heart*, the way Jesus asks us to, we’ve got to go through a process. In fact, a process with stages very similar to Elisabeth Kubler Ross’s five stages of grief.

“Most of us know we should forgive those who hurt us,” write the Linns. “But how can we forgive when we’ve tried everything we can think of, including prayer, and still feel stuck in the hurt?”¹ What are our choices besides being a passive doormat, or striking back and escalating the cycle of violence?

The Linns suggest moving at one’s own pace through the five stages of *healthy* forgiveness – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – in order to be able to extend what they call ‘the two hands that heal: one hand that stops the person who hurt us, and the other hand that reaches out, calms that person and offers new life.’²

Which is still easier said than done, but there’s a kindness and a patience and an acknowledgement of genuine hurt in the Linns’ scheme that opens us, transforms us even, so that we might forgive, as Jesus asks, *from our hearts*. To the Linns,

¹ Don’t Forgive Too Soon, Extending the Two Hands That Heal, Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn, Paulist Press, New York, 1997. p. iv.

² Ibid.

forgiveness, whether given or received is a grace from God. “The five stages are simply a way of asking for and opening ourselves to receive that grace.”³

I wish I had time in this sermon to talk more about the Linns’ stages of forgiveness – or even about the wonderful biblical examples they offer to illustrate the attention and dignity scripture advises for the one attempting to forgive – I think it’d require a sermon series! – but I did leave a copy of their book back in the foyer if anyone wants to borrow it. I commend to you also their book called *Healing Life’s Hurts*.

But I think what I most want you and I to “take away” is that at its best, forgiveness, at least forgiveness from the heart, is not a squelching of anger, or a pious passivity, or even an act of righteous will, but an organic process of the inner healing and outer reconciliation that God intends for all human relations. The inability to forgive, as many of us know, comprises its own torture. The process, not the act but the *process* to forgive, that’s the struggle, as Holly Hunter says in *Saving Grace*, between faith and being human. But finally to forgive, even if it takes, as Jesus suggests, seventy-seven times to get it right, finally to forgive *from the heart* is truly...divine.

To the glory of God. Amen.

³ Ibid., p. v.