

## **Pentecost 15A, Proper 19. September 15, 2017. Matthew 18:21-35.**

Christians are a people made of forgiveness. It is a basic part of the deep grammar of the Christian life. In theory, the way it works is that we have been forgiven, and so we forgive. God's forgiveness creates the church, the body of people that rejoices in the forgiveness of God, and then the church participates in the ongoing work of reconciling the world to God—which is basically the work of teaching the world to rejoice in God's loving forgiveness. Our internal common life depends on our eagerness to forgive each other. In fact, our life together is to a large degree about becoming fluent in the language and logic of forgiveness, which is much more than just being careful not to hold a grudge. We might even say that our facility with a life of forgiveness is proportionate to our progress in the Christian life.

But the fact that the practices of forgiveness are in our very DNA as Christians does not mean that we're really very good at it, or understand it, or don't make a terrible hash of it as often as not. Forgiveness is hard to do, but it's even harder when we feel an injunction to do it, but don't really have a great idea of what it is. At times, it feels like telling a toddler, "Get your life together, kid. Get a job, balance your checkbook, and show me your five year plan." That may all be good advice, but the kid doesn't know what any of that stuff is.

All too often, I think this is how we are with forgiveness—we are told that we have to do it, but don't really know what it should look like. And today's gospel doesn't necessarily make this easier. The parable shows us a perversion of the logic of forgiveness I opened with. Here instead of getting a guy who is able to forgive because he has been forgiven, we get an assurance that if we don't forgive, we will be tortured. It reminds me for some reason of the old "we'll throw her in the water, and if she floats she's a witch—so then we can kill her properly." Because forgiveness at gunpoint or torturepoint or whatever only works for the straightforward debt scenario Jesus describes. We can forgive a loan at gunpoint—but is that really what we mean when we talk about forgiving those who sin against us? God knows and we know that there are deeper pains we cause each other than owing each other money.

And it's these deeper pains that are harder truly to forgive: the betrayal of trust, deliberate cruelty where we expected kindness or mercy, the rejection of some part of us that makes us who we are. And yet even for these deep difficult pains, the model of forgiveness that is most common for us is this economic model of releasing someone from repayment of a debt. When I was a kid, I was taught that this is how God forgives, and so it is how we are to forgive. In delightfully colorful language, I was told that when we repent, God forgives us and throws our sins into something called the "sea of forgetfulness." As if God reached into the divine brain and removed something, then wound up and hurled a fastball towards some part of creation that God is otherwise careful not to look at.

I no longer think that's right, and I think that most of the biblical witness supports me. We are approaching Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, when provisions are made for God to forgive sins. And though the ritual practice of our Jewish cousins has evolved a great deal, the original instructions in Leviticus involve a mass of detail and several sacrifices. It is intricate and long and drawn out and messy and it happens every year. Most Christians no longer observe this holy day, but even for us, our final

reconciliation to God was accomplished through the long, messy business of the incarnation—through the birth, life, and ultimately death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And there's nothing messier than the entirety of a human life.

I don't mean here to dive into the mysterious mechanics of atonement, but only to point out that for most of the biblical witness, God's forgiveness of us does not look like a handshake agreement not to think about certain discrete mistakes. It is viscerally embodied. It is a matter of blood, sweat, and tears. And this resonates with those times in my life when I have tried hardest to forgive those who have deeply harmed me. It is a process that costs something, that requires me to change, that has setbacks and false starts and false dawns.

Deep forgiveness usually does not look like someone calmly slipping a mortgage into a shredder. It looks like the incarnation: like the wronged party going to unimaginable extremes to understand the offender. Like a love that is not dependent on the beloved's behavior. It looks like redemption that sets the forgiver and the forgiven free to be their true selves again.

Unfortunately, I don't have a five point plan for infallible forgiveness. I did at first, but quite late last night my computer ate my original draft of this sermon. So instead I have these three things that I am convinced are integral to a life of forgiveness. Forgiveness is built on understanding. We don't have available the extreme option that God took in Jesus of taking on a life like that of the person we are trying to forgive. But we can turn our anger and pain towards curiosity, and nurture our curiosity until it becomes compassion.

Forgiveness requires love; we might even say that love is the engine that drives forgiveness. I don't know of any other way to enable the kind of humility that forgiving and being forgiven requires. And forgiveness is about redemption. That is to say, it is about making meaning out of pain, building a future of wholeness out of the shards of a broken past. It is about forging a right relationship between enemies. Not necessarily repairing the relationship that was—I utterly deny any understanding of forgiveness that keeps an abusive relationship going. But forging a right relationship: one that is an aid to each party living a full, meaningful, faithful life.

So what about our unjust servant who took his forgiveness for his astronomical debt and then went around grabbing his petty debtors by the throat? I don't think he's helpful in giving us clues on how to forgive. But he does show us what life is like when we refuse to enter into the life of forgiveness. I think that where he really goes wrong is that he treats forgiveness as a commodity to be acquired for himself and then maintained and defended. When in fact it is a way of being in the world. We can only really have the stamina for forgiveness if it is flowing through us—forgiven and forgiving, abiding in communities generated by forgiveness. Perhaps the lesson is not “forgive or be tortured,” but a stark reminder that a life without forgiveness is itself torture enough. Amen.