

September 17, 2017

The Great Forgiveness

Prayer

May the words of my mouth be mediations of our hearts be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. AMEN

Sermon

If you were here last Sunday you heard me lament that on returning from a three-month sabbatical instead of a nice parable to preach on, I got the Gospel reading “if a church member sins against you.” And it goes through what you should do to try to bring that person back into the good graces of the church. This Gospel reading today is a follow-up to that.

Jesus shared that with his disciples. And we now have Peter speaking up. Something that Peter often does. Sometimes to his detriment and sometimes to his glory. This time I think Peter was trying to get into Jesus’ good graces. He’s heard

about bringing brother or sister of the church who has sinned against them, how to bring them back to the church, and only as a last resort when the person simply will not listen to the truth that they become like a gentile or a tax collector.

So, Peter now comes up and says, “Well Lord, if a brother or sister of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” He thought he was doing really good, seven times that’s a lot. Most of us would have trouble making it to seven times forgiving somebody that has hurt us or sinned against us. So, I think Peter was secretly saying, “This is good enough.” He was going to hear, “Peter boy you are going above and beyond. I was going to say three but if you want seven that will be great.” That’s not the answer he got. “I say not seven times (Peter was probably hopeful at that point) but seventy-seven times.” And in another Gospel, it says seventy times seven times. That’s a lot. But Jesus doesn’t leave it there. He’s given an answer. His answer is you continue to forgive. That’s what the seventy-seven or seventy times seven represents. You continue to forgive. And now I’m going to explain to you why?

That's what the rest of this reading is about. I'm going to explain to you why you forgive this many times. And he tells the parable.

Now the parables were wonderful things but they were intended for first century audience. They speak primarily to the people that Jesus could look in the eye. But there is as we know a deeper truth to the parables that we have for ourselves. Now the difficulty with our understanding of this parable can be that we live in a time where we don't have kings that we work for or masters that we serve as servants or slaves very much.

And so, this whole idea of serving and reckoning accounts is a little foreign to us. And so, a brief explanation (well you know I never do anything very briefly) it comes time for the owner, the master, the king, to say it's time for you guys to pay for what you owe. I've loaned you money, I've given you opportunities. Now is the time for reckoning. It's time to figure out how much you really owe me and now it's time to pay up.

Now as Jesus often does, he uses some extravagant example.

And the first slave is an extravagant example. He comes in owes

him ten thousand talons. Hard to believe anybody in a lifetime as a servant could run up that kind of tab. Ten thousand talons represented years and years of income. It was an amount so vast that it could not possibly be paid off by a servant, by a slave. And so, the initial response of the king is you have got so much, you owe me so much that the only way that I can get back what is mine is if I sell you as a slave. You, your wife, your children, all your possessions and then I might get a good part of what you owe me back. Ten thousand talons was an impossible number for a slave.

And of course, the slave does what he could do. He falls on his knees and he pleads with him. "Just be patient with me, I will get better. I will take care of this debt, I will pay you everything that I owe." Knowing that it was impossible. Couldn't possibly be. The ears of the disciples knew that that was not a possibility and yet the master, the king was so moved with pity that he says, "You know, I'm going to forgive your debt. I'm just going to wipe it out. And we will continue to start over. You'll still be my servant, my slave, but you won't have that debt hanging

over you anymore. You don't have to worry about that anymore." That's good news. That is great news.

Doesn't have to worry about paying back ten thousand talons that he'll never have. He doesn't have to give up his family. He doesn't have to give up anything. His life can go on. It's like starting over. New life, new birth. Sound familiar?

And yet as he goes out so thankful for himself, he sees a fellow servant, a fellow slave who owes him a hundred denarii. Now a hundred denarii in the time of Jesus was about a hundred days of pay. Usually a tenant worker would make one denarii a day, it was about a hundred days' worth.

"Pay me what you owe." And the response even though this is certainly a debt that he would be able to pay over time. He falls on his knees and says, "Be patient with me and I will pay you everything I owe." And it's possible for him to do that. But the same servant who has just received this great gift of forgiveness does not feel the need to pass that on in a smaller amount to his fellow servant. In the same boat that he was in. Sends him to debtor's prison so that he can work there and

then get paid enough that all the pay goes to the one that you are in debt to. Sends him to prison until his debt is paid.

Well the other servants see this and they are not even a little bit pleased. And they go to the king, the master, and they say this is what just happened out there. So, he's call him in and he's angry. How could you do that? I forgave you all that debt and one of your own, someone who is in the same boat as you. You could not forgive even that small amount?

Now Matthew is writing to a Jewish congregation, a Jewish group, and they are very familiar with the Old Testament. And they are familiar that God shows an angry side from time to time. So, you see you get more of this in Matthew than you do in Mark or Luke. But the response of the king, the master is anger. And that you will be punished, not only will you go to prison. You know I may not sell you and your family which would have been better than what I'm going to do to you. Because I'm going to torture you until it's all paid. And the fact of the matter is it will never be paid.

Amazing little story. Trying to get the disciples and all who hear it. To know and understand that the forgiveness of God is a graceful act. That God forgiveness of our sins is because we are like the first servant. We have unmasked so much and continue to unmask so much that in our lifetime, we are so estranged from God by our own actions. We owe God so much that we cannot possibly pay it. It can't be done. We don't have the means, we will never have the means.

And so, it takes an act of grace, it takes an act of pity. It takes God coming in the form of humanity to teach and preach and show us and to invite us to be citizens of the kingdom of God. Based on a forgiveness that only a Savior can give. Which is why Jesus comes. He teaches and preaches and he shows us signs of the power of God. And he faces death in order to take up the punishment, the rightful punishment for sins for you, for you, for you, for me, for everyone. So that it might be taken away. So that true forgiveness can take place. So that we can be reborn. So that we don't have to worry about trying to pay back a sum that we cannot possibly pay back to God.

Now first century folks had a greater sense of this, I think. Part of the problem with our reception of this parable is that we don't have that great sense of the presence of God. That God created us. That God is imminent to our lives. That God is absolutely necessary for our lives to be. That we owe God everything. They had a much greater sense of that imminence of God and dependency upon God for their very existence than we have today, I think.

And so, when they hear this parable, they are touched in a way that is more difficult for us, I think. Because they hear about how far they are from God because of the living of their lives. And to hear that message that God forgives. That is a message of grace and of hope. That they never thought was possible because they are not able to live according to the law and to please God fully.

And then Jesus tells them just as you have been forgiven of this immense bill that you cannot possibly pay. You are called now to go out and to forgive one another. You are called to reflect that grace of God that you see in the living out of the living out

of Jesus' life, death, and that resurrection that is proof of what God has been saying about God's kingdom coming near.

The invitation to be part of God's kingdom and enter into its fullness as we leave this place. We are called to be filled with gratitude. That the sins we have committed against God, that estrangement that we have from God. Not trusting God, not following God as we should. Not treating God's creature, not treating God's creation as it should be. That that debt is forgiven but we are to reflect that to one another.

And that is a hard thing for us. Because we don't always keep in mind the great forgiveness that we have received and the hope in which we live. If we truly live out the gratitude and thankfulness that God has given to us. Maybe it would be a little easier for us to see the small hurts, the small sins that others may inflict on us. And to bring ourselves to forgive that small debt that they may owe us. And may make it easier to ask for forgiveness for that small debt that we may owe to others.

Peter comes to Jesus with a question, "how many times?" And it's a large number and it simply means that you continue to

forgive. Why? Because you have been forgiven so much and you are a part, a citizen of God's kingdom. And as a citizens of God's kingdom you go out and see your brother or sister who may owe you a debt and gratitude for what you have been forgiven. You forgive others. It's a powerful message. It's one that we need to hear and remember. But most of all to live out day by day.