Practicing Forgiveness

September 11, 2005 (Proper 19, Year A)

Ecclesiasticus 27:30-28:7 Psalm 103 Romans 14:5-12 Matthew 18:21-35

Poor Peter, always thinking he has the right answer, always getting things a little wrong! "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Matthew has Peter sound like a little child, impressed with the biggest number he can think of. Jesus responds with a story of unimaginable numbers. The hyperbolic 10,000 *denarii* debt that the slave owed the king is equivalent to three billion US dollars. Jesus' listeners would have been flummoxed, trying to imagine one person owing that much. It's a little like the old joke about big numbers, prayer and generosity.:

A man asks God, "How long is a million years to you?" And God says, "To me, a million years is as a single second." Then the man asks, "Well, how much is a million dollars to you?" And God says, "To me, a million dollars is as a single penny." And then the man says, "Hey God, can I have a penny?" And God says, "Sure. Hold on a second."

Last week, we talked about prayer and generosity. "Be constant in prayer," Paul told the church in Rome. "Be constant in prayer; contribute to the needs of the saints." Prayer, Paul was teaching the Romans, leads to action. Prayer leads to generosity – just as our prayers on Sunday were followed by a generous offering for Episcopal Relief and Development, taken up to contribute to the needs of the people of Louisiana, Alabama, Florida and Mississippi.

Today's gospel pushes our understanding of prayer a little further. Paul's letter showed us last week how practicing prayer can lead to generosity. Matthew's gospel challenges us to confront our practice of forgiveness.

Forgiveness – not only asking God's forgiveness, but also forgiving one another -- is central to our ability to pray meaningfully. The *absence* of practicing forgiveness, the choice to remain indefinitely in a state unforgiveness, can have a calcifying effect on our hearts. Consciously or unconsciously, we can hold on to our resentment until our hearts our hardened, and prayer becomes difficult and labored. Consciously or unconsciously, we can withhold forgiveness until we find ourselves imprisoned in our own resentment.

But there is good news! The good news is, we are broken people in the company of broken people. Good news, because in this lifetime we always have an excuse to practice forgiveness.

Just as I had to run scales over and over and over again when I was studying clarinet, Jesus asks impulsive, angry, sword-carrying Peter to keep practicing forgiveness. Seven times ain't nothin' at all. Try seven times seven. And keep on trying, until you lose count. Practice, practice, practice. Or as the apostle Paul might have written: Be constant in forgiveness.

In church, we're pretty good about practicing the work and joy of asking God's forgiveness for the things we have done and left undone. We don't place much emphasis on asking one another's forgiveness very often, although the Gospels and letters of Paul are full of advice on the importance of doing so in church. We don't place much emphasis on asking one-another's forgiveness in church. One reason could be that so much of liturgy has been written by priests, and we hold, as priests, that particular ministry of pronouncing the forgiveness from God which you received freely from God's grace.

I mean to say, if we stop only at asking God's forgiveness, that although the sacrament of confession and reconciliation is a beautiful gift of being church, the liturgy has the potential to reinforce a false hierarchy of ministries. But asking one another's forgiveness has the potential to push us towards that radical community which gathered around Jesus –

rich and poor, women and men, Jew and Gentile.

This week, as we remember 4 years since September 11th, forgiveness is a touch subject. Forgiveness takes courage, because forgiveness takes not-forgetting. If we practice forgiveness, we cannot bury the past under rhetoric, violence, or distraction.

Many people are afraid that to talk about forgiveness is to condone what has been done to us. But God has made clear, for thousands of years, from the days of Joseph forgiving his brothers who sold him into slavery in Egypt, there is no new beginning without forgiveness. There is no new beginning without forgiveness.

Sometimes we balk at forgiveness because we misunderstand what forgiveness is. The Rev. Barbara Crofton, an Episcopal priest from New York, offers this list of seven things forgiveness does not mean:

> **1. Forgive and Forget.** *Nonsense. History has happened and forgiveness doesn't wipe it out.*
>
> **2. If I forgive, it'll mean what he did was okay.** *Also nonsense. You don't have to forgive things that are okay - they're already okay, right?*
>
> **3. It will mean he gets away with it.** *Nope. Actions have consequences and the one who sins against you will have to pay for his actions. We all must.*
>
> **4. It will mean he didn't really hurt me.** *No, it won't. Forgiveness is not acquittal. See #2.*
>
> **5. I can't forgive her; she's not even sorry.** *Your forgiveness isn't really about her, although she occasioned the need for it. Forgiveness is about you: your freedom. Your future. Getting your life back.*
>
> **6. I can't. It's been too long.** *Maybe it happened long ago. But if you're carrying it around now, it's a current reality.*
>
> **7. I can't. The one I'm furious at is me.** *Well, that's the person most people can't forgive, most often. More than anyone else. Ask yourself if you would hold out on anyone else as long as you are holding out on yourself. Make use of the Church's assurance of God's forgiveness in a sacramental confession, and then ask yourself if you are above God (Hint: the answer is no.).*[1]

I'm going to add one more to Barbara's list:

8. They don't need *my* forgiveness.

This is the great co-dependent, passive aggressive trap: It's one I know very well myself. There have been times in my life when I have *refused* to look at my own wounds, the broken places where others have trespassed.

It's a habit I share with others, many of us adult children of alcoholics. Our job is to make other people happy, which requires practicing a habit of ignorance about our own selves. The wounds are there, but as long as I don't acknowledge the sin against me, I can't practice forgiveness. Who am I to forgive someone?

Who am I to forgive someone? I am the person God made, and in Christ God has asked me to forgive others. You are the person God made, and in Christ God has asked you to forgive others.

In our prayers, in passing the peace, in pulling weeds, with our families, friends and neighbors, in repentance and in rejoicing, we celebrate our new beginning in Christ by practicing forgiveness, forgiving one another, forgiving the world without forgetting, refusing to forget God's commandments, God's hope for us in peace and in justice; refusing to be poisoned by anger or resentment.

Practicing forgiveness not once or twice, not six or seven times, but seven times seven, seventy seven times, seven times seventy, again and again and again.

---

[1] This list copyright © 2005 Barbara Crafton, http://www.geraniumfarm.org

© 2005, Devin McLachlan.