

Fifteen Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
13 September 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

Most of us agree, at least philosophically that it is good to forgive those who offend us. It is this particular person “A” or person “B” that we have a hard time forgiving. When someone we know sins against us, the betrayal could be so devastating that forgiving them is much harder than forgiving a complete stranger who sins against us. Today we have a passage from Scripture about forgiveness and many in our Church often talk about terrorism, crime, or some type of institutional sin. I find it very interesting that the reading for this week, when we celebrate the anniversary of the September 11 attacks is about forgiveness. We can then preach how God wants us to forgive the Taliban. In away that would be an easier sermon to preach. But this is not what this passage is about, which makes this passage even more difficult to accept and to put into practice.

This parable Jesus tells his disciples has a local, domestic flavor, and it is meant to resolve conflicts within the specific congregation. It begins with Peter's question, “If a member of the Church sins against me, how many times should I forgive?” The question is not, “If a terrorist from another country blows up our institutions and causes thousands of deaths, how often must i forgive him?” This is a local answer for a local problem. We know this because the parable that Jesus tells the Disciples has to do with a Master-Servant relationship and with a Servant-Servant relationship. These people knew each other. There was a level of common-ground among them. They knew each other's families, they were members of the same community.

The parable then is meant to resolve issues within the community, those who belonged within, brothers and sisters gathered by the same God into a family that enjoyed a common purpose. The question then is about forgiveness within our circle of those who offend us. There are two views about forgiveness: 1. Without acknowledgement of sin and repentance the sinned-against does not have to forgive. 2 Forgiveness does not necessitate repentance or the ability to repay the debt, but it is a freeing experience for the sinned-against who releases his anger, need for vengeance, frustration, etc. The sinned-against refuses to allow those emotions to keep him bound to the event, by releasing the person from his debt.

I, and many commentators, believe that Matthew adheres to the second principle here. Forgiveness can be done before acknowledgement or even restoration takes place. It doesn't mean that the relationship is restored, however.

The fact that you release, let go of the offense or the way the offense makes you feel, does not mean that the relationship is restored, even when the offender fails to repent and atone for his sins. Restoration of relationship requires acknowledgement of the sin, repentance, atonement, and, in some cases, restitution. In a way, forgiveness serves a great purpose for the person sinned-against in that it allows him or her to get unstuck and begin to recover.

To illustrate the point that forgiveness can take place before re-payment or restitution happens, Jesus tells a story of a Gentile king and his relationship with one of his servants. According to Stophregen, (www.crossmark.com) we know that he is a Gentile king because the amount owed is 10,000 talents which is an astronomical amount. This can only be the total amount of taxes owed to the king by a large town or city. King Herod, for example only received about 900 talents a year in taxes. 10,000 talents means this is a Gentile king. The servant lost the taxes of an entire city. We are not told how he lost the money, all we are told is that he owed this money to the king.

The text also tells us that the servant worships the king, which is another indication that this is a Gentile King. This would have been an impossibility for Jews to do. Also, Jewish law prohibits the sale of the wife and children of a debtor, as well as the torturing of a prisoner who is incarcerated for default of a loan. This is a foreign king, who acts in a surprising way: he forgives the debt. In a way, Matthew may be using an anti-Gentile bias to say, "If even a Gentile king can show such mercy, how much more should we, members of the same family, show each other?" He could also be saying, "If even a Gentile king can offer such mercy, how much more will your loving God offer you?" The king forgives which means the servant is free to go home and resume his life.

So far, this is a shocking story of a king who acts in an unexpected way by forgiving such great debt. But, then Jesus continues and brings the parable to our level. He tells us that the servant then found a fellow servant who owed him 1/600,000th percent of what he had been forgiven. An insignificant amount that can be paid back to him if he is patient and gives his fellow servant some time. He refuses to release the debt and he refuses to allow for extra time. He places the servant in prison until he pays the last cent. Whereas he was forgiven his very life, he fails to forgive a minor infraction from his neighbor.

We are told that the King went back on his word, refused to honor his promise of forgiveness, and applied the original punishment to his unforgiving servant. This is an uncomfortable part of the parable. Does this mean that God can go back on his word? Does this mean that the debt wasn't really forgiven? Can we lose our salvation and forgiveness? Are we all unforgiving Christians in danger

of condemnation and hell? These are uncomfortable questions. If God forgives us so freely and we are unwilling to forgive others, do we risk losing God's forgiveness?

I believe the key here is to remember that this king is a Gentile king who feels as though his honor was offended. He has made a fool of himself by forgiving such a servant. The entire community will think he is weak and naive. He risks losing the respect of his subjects and this is dangerous for any king. Insurrection, disobedience, lawlessness, chaos... all these things can happen in a kingdom where subjects believe the king is weak and unable to enforce the law. This wicked subject has forced the king to act in such a way to safeguard his reputation and protect his reign. He has no choice but to punish the unforgiving servant. Anything less would have been dangerous and irresponsible.

Our case is different because our God is not a Gentile king. Our God is a loving father who goes to any extent to forgive sinners. He goes to the extent of sending Christ to pay the 10,000 talents debt for us. This debt has been paid and remains paid. What the passage does say is that behaviors have consequences. How we treat each other matters a great deal to God. At the end of days we will be accountable for the way we treated others, especially members of our church family and those people God has placed in our lives. To fail to forgive means to hold on to the type of hate, anger, resentment, and bitterness that will keep us bound, enslaved, imprisoned by our own pain. Our job as Christians is to seek the kingdom of God first, but failure to forgive focuses the mind on grievances and pain and not on God. We forgive, in order to be released from our pain, so that we may love God and others with all our mind, heart, and soul.

I do want to add a caution here. Forgiveness is seldom an event. It is a process. Some tell me "I just can't forgive" and I say to them, "That's OK, keep trying! You will get there with God's help." Some of us are able to forgive quickly and move on. Some of us require more time to think, pray, perhaps even to engage in therapy. This is okay! Forgiveness is possible, but some times it make take time. If you are willing to forgive, God will give you the ability to do so in due time. Keep working at it and don't give up. We are here to support you!

Now a note about terrorism. As Christians we have a duty to forgive, but this is an individual duty that is different from the right of nations to defend their citizens from any dangers foreign and domestic. To fight terrorism is not against God. We have a duty to protect ourselves from danger. It is important, however, that we use appropriate force and never forsake proper justice. We must not devolve into barbarism and blood-seeking revenge. In the mean time, let us

remember that this passage is not about the Taliban, but about the neighbor sitting next to you. You who have been forgiven your very life, are called by God today to forgive each other as God himself has forgiven you. And this is possible, with God's help. Amen!