

Sermon for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 18:21-22
*Then Peter came to Jesus
and asked, "Lord, if my
brother keeps on sinning
against me, how many times
do I have to forgive him?
Seven times?" "No, not seven
times," answered Jesus, "but
seventy times seven."*



To be forgiven and to forgive

On this day of 9/11 many congregations are remembering what happened in New York 10 years ago. For some talk of forgiveness on this day is a very hard pill to swallow. Death of loved ones in a tragic catastrophe is hard to take, especially when it is so many. But we continue today with last week's sermon on forgiveness. It is impossible to forgive on our own. Our human nature won't permit it, but with Christ, "All things are possible who strengthen me."

The poet Heinrich Heine once said, "My nature is the most peaceful in the world. All I ask is a simple cottage, a decent bed, good food, some flowers in front of my window, and a few trees beside my door. Then, if God wanted to make me

completely happy, he would let me enjoy the spectacle of six or seven of my enemies dangling from those trees. I would forgive them all the wrongs they have done me - forgive them from the bottom of my heart, for we must forgive our enemies. But not until they are hanged!"

There can be little disagreement with the statement, "Forgiveness is not natural; it is not a universal human virtue. Vengeance, retribution, violence are more natural human qualities. It is natural for humans to defend themselves, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when hurt, to bite back when bitten." (W.H. Willimon)

We have heard people say, and we have said it ourselves,

- "I can't bring myself to forgive him", or
- "How many times do I have to forgive her, she keeps on hurting me over and over again," or
- "Why should I forgive, he's not sorry for what he's done to me."

For a moment think of the worst thing that someone has done to you. Think of the hurt that this person has caused in your life. Feel the bitterness, the coldness, and the pain that this person has caused you. Now picture yourself extending the hand of forgiveness to the person, embracing that person warmly like the father does in Jesus' story about the return of the runaway son who had hurt his father so much. Picture yourself saying meaningfully and gladly, "I forgive you."

I think you will agree with me that forgiveness may be one of the toughest things we as Christians are asked to do.

And so we have Peter come to Jesus with a perfectly natural question. "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?" This is a very important question. How many times have I been asked, "Do I have to keep on forgiving, if the other person keeps on hurting me? Wouldn't you agree that there has to be a limit." And that's exactly what Peter is asking. He would have thought that his suggestion of seven times was very generous. We agree. We forgive a person, once, twice, three times, but four times – I don't think we would still be friends after four times.

The Jewish Rabbis said that to forgive three times was enough. Peter was doubling that and adding one for good measure. But Jesus surprises Peter with his answer. "No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven." That's a lot! And that's exactly what Jesus was getting at. He's not stating that after 490 times of forgiving someone we stop, but that there is no limit to the forgiveness we should be offering to those who sin against us.

In effect Jesus is saying, "Throw away the calculator. Stop counting on your fingers. In God's Kingdom there is unlimited forgiveness – seventy times seven times seven times seven and so on."

Jesus then goes on to tell this unusual story. A king wanted to settle accounts and close the books on some outstanding loans with his servants. He had one servant who owed him millions of dollars. The debt was so big the man would never hope to see the outside of a jail cell ever again.

Does that seem a bit harsh? Well, before you are too tough on the king remember the servant had been entrusted with millions of dollars. The king is exceptionally generous! What

happened to all that money? To blow that much money the servant must have really lived it up. He wasted it all. No wonder the king is angry.

The servant begged for mercy. I don't know what plan he had in mind. There was no way that a servant could have rounded up that kind of money, no matter how much time he had. But the king in an amazing display of undeserved kindness simply forgave the debt, tore up the note, wrote "paid in full" on the books, and sent the servant on his way a free man.

The servant got up from his knees, dusted himself off, and went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a few dollars, loose change compared with the debt the king had just written off. We might have expected a bit of kindness on the part of one who has just received his life back, a token piece of generosity in the direction of a fellow servant. Instead, the servant grabbed his fellow servant by the throat and demanded payment in full. And when he begged for the same kind of mercy and patience as the first servant had, he found himself thrown into debtor's prison.

Now when the king got word of this he was outraged and called back the servant. "I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you." In his anger, the king had the servant thrown into jail until he paid off all the debt.

Jesus concludes, "That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive other people from your heart." Harsh words, you say. Startling words. How do those words make you feel, especially if you are harboring a grudge against someone and withholding forgiveness. These

are convicting and killing words. These words of Jesus remind us just how hard-hearted we can be. These words crush our hardened, unforgiving hearts so that his forgiveness might freely flow first to us and then through us to our neighbor.

This parable is like a mirror. It points out the vast amount that we have been forgiven. We are the servants who have a debt that is so vast that it is impossible for us to do anything about it. Like the servant who owed so much that it was impossible for him to get out of the consequences of his foolish squandering of all that money, our sin has put us in an impossible position. Our rebellions, our selfish acts and thoughts, our bad choices, our being loveless toward one another, and the hurt we have caused others, our pride, our anger, our lusts, our bitterness, our hates, and our lies; all these add up to a staggering debt we owe to God. A debt we cannot pay.

Our only hope rests in the compassion of the king. He was stripped, beaten, punished even though he was completely innocent. He died on a cross for us. He forgave the huge debt we owe. "Your sins are forgiven", he says. "Go in peace."

Then we rise from the pew, leave the communion table, walk outside the church humming "What a Friend we have in Jesus". And before we get to our car we see someone who has done us wrong and we want to grab him by the throat and say, "Pay me right now!"

This parable reflects our miserly notions of forgiveness compared with the extravagant and generous forgiveness that God gives to us. We have been forgiven so much but look at how miserable we are when it comes to generously

forgiving those who have hurt us. In the long run our inability to forgive hurts us more than it hurts the one who has hurt us.

A woman in her eighties told me that, fifty years before, her aunt had said something insulting to her, and this woman had never forgiven her. Fifty years later she could recount the event to the precise detail, and she felt all the same bitterness, anger, and resentment welling up within her as when it originally occurred. It was no wonder to me that, by this time, she had become a bitter, crotchety, quarrelsome, unhappy woman who could find no happiness in life whatsoever. Her inability to forgive had tortured her for fifty years.

Forgiveness begins when we stop saying, "Look how much you have hurt me," and start saying,

"What can I do to relieve the hurt that you are feeling?"

"What can I do to renew our relationship?"

When we are no longer concerned about ourselves and how hurt we are, but are concerned about what our unforgiving heart and our need to get back is doing to someone else – that's when forgiveness starts.

The thing that makes forgiveness of others who have hurt us possible is the newness in our relationship with God, the refreshed attitude toward others and their weaknesses, the forgiveness and reconciliation that Jesus' death on the cross has given to us. Paul says, **"You are the people of God, he loved you and chose you for his own. So then, ... forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you" (Colossians 3:12a,**

13).

Can we not forgive a few dollars' worth of injury, when we have been forgiven millions by God?

For the Christian, forgiveness is always the last word. The forgiver always has the last word. We sin and Jesus forgives us. We sin again and Jesus forgives us. We sin and sin and sin and Jesus forgives, forgives, forgives.

Forgiveness doesn't come easy. It is hard work. It's easy to make excuses, blame the other person, and justify our actions and attitudes. It's easy to say it's all his/her fault. I'll just avoid him until he comes and apologizes to me. It's much harder to take the first step toward reconciliation, especially when you feel that you are in the right.

Because forgiveness can be so hard, we need to enlist God's help to overcome our sinful attitudes and to be more like Christ.

We need to pray that we would have a greater concern for the welfare of others.

We need God's forgiveness for the many times when we let our sinful nature take control and we let the pain and the hurt continue. God grant that we forgive one another just as God has generously forgiven us.