

Proper 19 Year A—Matthew 18:21-25

Peter has a way of "just coming out with it" doesn't he? This time he asks, "If a member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter probably thought his proposal was very generous. For one thing, Rabbinic teaching mandated that a man should forgive his brother three times. For another thing, there is no mention of repentance on the part of the offending party. Jesus' response was far beyond Peter's proposal. In the NRSV translation Jesus replies "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times." In some translations, Jesus' reply is "seventy times seven." However, it is not the exact number that matters; the number merely means an indefinitely great number of times. More than that, the difference between Peter's proposal and Jesus' pronouncement is not just a matter of math or linguistics, but of the nature of forgiveness. Whoever tries to keep count of the number of times he or she has forgiven has not forgiven at all. The kind of forgiveness Jesus calls for is beyond calculation.

We Christians are asked again and again to be a forgiving people. Every time we say the Lord's Prayer, which is certainly the most well-known prayer amongst Christians, we pray "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". The challenge for me is: How do I forgive? How can I feel good about the mother who locked her child in a basement for five years? First of all, forgiveness is not about warm, fuzzy feelings. Secondly, (as Barbara Crafton teaches us), forgiveness and pardon are not the same thing. Forgiveness does not mean a guilty person doesn't receive the logical consequences of his action. Most important, as Christians we don't deny the existence of evil. Evil is very real and sometimes has to be dealt with by police, social workers, judges, and all those who are employed to protect the innocent.

What forgiveness can do is to take the edge off our judgementalism and the stress off our hearts. We began our Eucharist this morning as we begin every Eucharist with the Collect for Purity. The Collect for Purity is for me one of our most beautiful prayers. "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit." The thoughts of our hearts are not the same as the thoughts of our minds. The heart is the fountain of our being, where our feelings, evaluations, and resolves originate. Both the scars of woundedness and healing balm may be found in the heart. Holding unforgiving feelings

in the heart is a form of wound, while forgiveness is a purifying and cleansing balm. I have heard said that life is 10% of what happens to us and 90% of how we respond to it. So what can we do to see that our response is life-giving?

I have mentioned one of my mentors John Claypool, who was a preacher and writer. He wrote a little gem called *Mending the Heart*. In the book, he recommends that we look at people who have harmed us from several different perspectives in order to get a clearer picture of reality. Psychologists would probably call this cognitive work. Claypool has us look *behind*, *within*, *ahead*, and *up*. Looking *behind* means noting that those who treat us the most destructively are just as much products of their own past as we are. Looking *within* persons who have caused us problems means remembering that they are human beings and not just human “doings.” When we have been hurt, we tend to focus totally on the destructive things someone has done and thus reduce the whole person to one particular action. “If we look within,” Claypool says, “we see that a single action is not the whole story of anyone’s life.”

A third vantage point Claypool recommends is to look *ahead*. Ask “What is likely to happen if I take this action instead of that one?” Every time we act, we make a difference. We inject some of our own power into a situation. Our first instinct when we are badly hurt by another is to want to do the same thing in return, but when we follow that instinct, we only increase the amount of damage that was there in the first place. Mahatma Gandhi said, “An eye for an eye and the whole world becomes blind.” His great admirer Martin Luther King had a variation of the Gandhi saying that went “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is a blind and toothless generation.” The most creative way to respond to an injury is to do something loving; even if you don’t feel it, just to do it. It introduces a whole new element into the experience of grievance.

Finally, Claypool gives us a fourth vantage point, which is *up*. Looking up means having the willingness to remember the great forgiveness that God has already given us. God, you know, is not as fastidious as we are. God died for all of us on the cross. There are not some he didn’t die for. It is in accepting God’s merciful forgiveness, internalizing it, and then extending it to others that the heart is cleansed and purified. St. Teresa of Avila once asked God, “How can I ever thank you for all the blessings you have given

me?” The answer came, “By showing love to those who are as undeserving of it as you are of mine.”

I would like to end with a story which is not from Claypool, but from Anthony de Mello. It’s a variation on the “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone” idea.:

Three boys accused of stealing watermelons were brought to court and faced the judge nervously, expecting the worst, for he was known to be a severe man. He was also a wise educator. With a rap of his gavel he said, “Any man in here who never stole a single watermelon when he was a boy, raise his hand.” He waited. The court officials, policeman, spectators—and the judge himself—kept their hands on the desks in front of them. When he was satisfied that not a single hand was raised in the court, the judge said, “Case dismissed.”

Let us pray that each one of us will make strides in forgiving each other as God has forgiven us. Amen.