

Saint Matthew's/San Mateo Episcopal Church

Pentecost 15, Proper 19, September 13, 2020

READINGS:

Genesis 50:15-21

Psalms 103:(1-7), 8-13

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude."

In our reading for today from Matthew's Gospel, Peter asks Jesus just how far he really has to go with this "forgiveness thing." He knows that forgiving other people just as we want God to forgive us is part of the prayer Jesus has given to the disciples and to the church. He also may be thinking of the old rabbinic tradition that a person should forgive another who has sinned against him as many as four times. So, thinks Peter, forgiving seven times is generous!

Jesus says no to that idea, and tells Peter he must forgive seventy-times-seven times. And then, Jesus tells one of his famous stories.

In this story, there is a king with a slave who owes him ten thousand talents. A talent was a silver piece worth around 10,000 denarii. One denarius was the pay for a day's labor, so ten thousand talents would come to a hundred million denarii. That is a hundred million days of work - an impossible sum. One of my preaching resources says the slave's debt would be like owing a "bazillion" dollars!

In Jesus' day, a person with a debt could be sent to prison until it was paid. So the slave begs his master to be patient, and he will pay him. I'm sure the king knows how absurd THAT idea is. He does NOT do what the slave begged. Instead, he immediately forgives the whole debt!

As the slave leaves, he meets another slave. Matthew tells us the second slave owes the first a hundred denarii - a tiny fraction of the debt the king has just forgiven. Does our slave forgive

as he has been forgiven? No! He throttles his fellow slave, and then has him thrown into prison.

When the king finds out how the slave has behaved, he is very angry. "I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" He hands the slave over "to be tortured" until the whole debt is paid.

And then Jesus states the big problem, for Peter and for us. "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart.'

Ouch! We must be careful what we pray for, as the old saying goes. We might get it! We must forgive, or like the slave in the parable, we will suffer punishment.

Saint Augustine says in his commentary on this scripture that the fulfillment of the command to forgive as we are forgiven calls for "the most vigorous obedience." Forgiveness is often REALLY hard. We think if we forgive, we make ourselves into doormats for others to walk over. We think forgiving others means we invite them to abuse us, or to abuse others.

Not true, Saint Augustine tells us. We are all in debt to God, he says, just as other people are in debt to us. Every day we pray to be forgiven as we forgive others. "Which of our trespasses," Augustine asks, do we want forgiven - "all of them, or only some? All, you will answer. Do likewise, therefore, with those who have offended you."

Joseph found both forgiveness and reassurance for his brothers in our reading from Genesis today. "Am I in the place of God?" he asks. "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good...I myself will provide for you and your little ones."

And Saint Paul reminds us in his letter to the church in Rome that we should not judge or despise each other because "we will all stand before the judgment seat of God."

But where do we start to forgive, when someone has really hurt or damaged us? Where do we start when we know what we must do, and don't WANT to do it?

Like Joseph, we begin with the knowledge that we are not in the place of God.

Rosemond E. Herklots, who wrote the words to Hymn 674 in The Hymnal 1982, suggests that the grace of God is where we start. She writes: "'Forgive our sins as we forgive' you taught us, Lord, to pray, but you alone can grant us grace to live the words we say." And, she says, we will be peacemakers when we rely on God's power to "cleanse the depths within our souls and bid resentment cease!

Next we realize that we can rely on God's grace and his power to help us when we have someone we need to forgive. We just need to ask him to help us.

Prayer makes a good next step. Ernesto M. Medina suggests in one of his sermons titled "Peter Came and Said" that the path to forgiveness might begin with a ten-second prayer.

Picture the person you need to forgive.

Offer this prayer:

Gracious God, I lift up to you (name of your "favorite" enemy), that they may know the love you have for them. Amen.

Let God in.

Let God work.

Let God offer you freedom in forgiving.

Listen to this story from C. Michael Hawn, University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Church Music at Southern Methodist University:

"I was in South Africa in 1998 during the presidency of Nelson Mandela. Archbishop Desmond Tutu presented President Mandela with the bound volumes containing the results of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I was sitting among a group of black and white Methodist ministers watching this historic occasion on television as Tutu referenced one of the many important revelations that took place during the process that the Commission hoped would lead to healing and hope for South Africa. At one point, Tutu recalled a black woman who asked him, 'Who murdered my husband?' Tutu responded, 'We do not know.' She was insistent, however, and continued, 'I must know who killed my husband.' Again, the patient Tutu responded, 'I'm sorry, but we may never know who killed your husband.' Still her question persisted. Finally, Tutu asked, 'My dear lady, why must you know who killed your husband?' She responded simply and quietly, 'So I can forgive him'."

As Jesus said in our Gospel a few weeks ago, "Listen. Let anyone with ears listen."

Amen.