

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 19 – Year A

September 17, 2017

By: The Rev. Linda J. Ferguson

- *Genesis 50: 15-21*
- *Psalm 103: 8-13*
- *Romans 14: 1-12*
- *Matthew 18: 21-35*

“How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered Peter, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Forgiveness. It seems like a simple thing. So, what does it mean to forgive? What does it mean to be forgiven? Why should we forgive others? Does forgiveness mean no consequences? If God forgives why do we need to seek forgiveness from others? So many questions, all of which we won't be able to answer in a single sermon, but I think that the message we heard this morning can help start us in the right direction.

For Jesus, forgiveness is a way of being, a way of living, a way of loving, a way of relating, a way of thinking and seeing. It is nothing less than the way of Christ. If we are to follow Christ then it must become our way as well.

Today we stand at a difficult, seemingly impossible, place. Last week was the 16th anniversary of the September 11 tragedy. The memories, the images, the anger, the fear, the pain and losses all intersect with Jesus's teaching on forgiveness. Both are real. Both are true. The deeper truth, however, is that we would still be standing at the same intersection even if September 11 had never occurred. We stand at that place every day of our life. Look at the history of the world and you will see the Holocaust, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, racial discrimination, economic oppression, wars and torture in Afghanistan and Iraq. How do we come to a situation that in a world where there is so much violence unfolding in the Middle East - Iraq and Syria and Gaza, in our nation, and overseas in Europe. Look at your own lives and you will find broken promises, hurt feelings, betrayals, harsh words, physical and

emotional wounds. Every one of us could tell stories of being hurt or victimized by another. Beneath the pain, the wounds, the losses, and the memories lies the question of forgiveness.

Some of us will strike back seeking revenge. Some of us will run away from life and relationships. I don't say that out of criticism or judgment of someone else but out of my own experience. I've done them all. I know how hard forgiveness can be. All of us struggle with it and often avoid it. I also know that none of those answers are the way of Christ. All of them leave us stuck in the past.

The only way to move forward is through "forgiveness. That does not mean we forget, condone, or approve of what was done. It does not mean we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice. It means we are released from them. We let go of the thoughts and fantasies of revenge. We look to the future rather than the past. We try to see and love as God sees and loves. Forgiveness is a way in which we align our life with God's life. This morning in his letter to the Romans we heard Paul said that to withhold forgiveness is to put ourselves in the place of God, the ultimate judge to whom all are accountable (Ro. 14:10, 12).

God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are integrally related. That is more than apparent in today's parable. The king forgives his slave an extraordinary amount. Ten thousand talents is about 3000 years of work at the ordinary daily wage. It seems there is no debt too large to be forgiven. This man, this debtor, was forgiven. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. That's how our God is. This slave, however, refused to forgive his fellow slave 100 denarii, about three months of work at the ordinary daily wage. Too often that's what our world is like. Frequently, it is how we are. In that refusal the forgiven slave lost his own forgiveness.

Every Sunday, we pray together these words in the "Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We pray those words with ease and familiarity but do we live our prayer? Do our actions support our request?

That's a lot of forgiveness but the pain of the world, our nation, and individuals is great. We need to forgive as much, maybe more, for ourselves as for the one we forgive. Forgiving those who trespass against us is the salve that begins to heal our wounds.

So how do we begin to forgive? There is no easy road to forgiveness. Don't let anyone tell you, "Just give it up to God. Forgive and forget." Forgiving one another takes time and work. It is something we must practice every day. It begins with recognition and thanksgiving that we have been forgiven. We are the beneficiaries of the crucified one. Hanging on the cross between two thieves Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them" (Lk. 23:34). That is the cry of infinite forgiveness, a cry we are to echo in our own lives, in our families, our work places, our parishes, our day to day life.

Forgiveness

Once upon a time two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed without a hitch. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

One morning there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days work" he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there. Could I help you?"

"Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor, in fact, it's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to the river levee and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll go him one better. See that pile of lumber curing by the barn? I want you to build me a fence -- an 8-foot fence -- so I won't need to see his place anymore. Cool him down, anyhow."

The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."

The older brother had to go to town for supplies, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day.

The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, nailing.

About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job.

The farmer's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped.

There was no fence there at all. It was a bridge -- a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work handrails and all -- and the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming across, his hand outstretched.

"You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done."

The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and then they met in the middle, taking each other's hand. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox on his shoulder. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother.

"I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, "but, I have many more bridges to build."

Forgiveness does not originate in us. It begins with God. That's what the slave who refused to forgive didn't understand. It was not about him. It's about God. We do not choose to forgive.

We can forgive the person who cuts us off on the freeway, after having some thoughts and words that might also need forgiveness. We can even forgive bigger offense for example when someone says something they don't mean that hurt our feelings. But what about the person who hurts us physically? What about the person who shows no remorse? What about the person who denies our humanity and then walks away as if nothing happened? That is how many times you choose. With each choosing we each move a step closer to forgiveness.

I know all of us have been hurt by someone else in some pretty serious ways. It's not just small things we can shrug off. Other people have left some serious wounds, physical and emotional that are going to take a long time to heal. Are those who have sinned against us supposed to be forgiven?

Yes! Because God forgives us. As people who are forgiven by God we are also asked to show forgiveness to others.

In her new campaign memoir, "What Happened," Hillary Clinton shares how a recent message of Pope Francis helped her heal. She writes: "He called for a 'revolution of tenderness.'" And by coincidence, the pope made his remarks exactly one year after Hillary Clinton released a campaign commercial called "Love and Kindness," a phrase she used on the campaign trail. But, she suggests in her book that in the aftermath of the election she lost sight of that. Ultimately what Clinton took away from Pope Francis's message was that she was faced with two choices for how she wanted to live out the rest of her life: "I can carry around my bitterness forever, or I can open my heart once more to love and kindness," she wrote. "That's the path I choose."

Forgiveness creates space for new life. It is the healing of our soul and life. It is the refusal to let our future be determined by the past. It is the letting go of the thoughts, the hatred and the fear that fill us so that we might live and love again. **"It is something we choose to do for Christ's sake; because God has forgiven us."**

May we possess the spirit of gratitude for all that we have been given - and forgiven - and may that spirit enable us to create God's Kingdom here and now, in which forgiveness is joyfully offered and humbly but confidently sought, mirroring the mercy and forgiveness of God, the compassionate Father of us all. Amen.

Resources:

ConnectionsMediaWorks.com – September 2017

The Text This Week: Scripture Study, Worship Links, and Resource

New American Bible: St. Joseph Addition

Skywriting.net/inspirational/stories/forgiveness.html