

Trinity 22-How Many Times Must I Forgive?

Text: St. Matthew 18:21-25

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (18:22).

This glorious day, I bring you greetings from a loving and merciful God who we turn to in our sin and seek forgiveness, and who in turn asks us to do the same. (Be seated)

It had been a very long day. It started routinely enough, early morning meeting at the Jetport with the entire senior transportation staff. The conversation in the first few minutes I remember as routine-noise complaints from several regular callers, three ships due in this week at the waterfront, report on the train project, all matter of fact. Somewhere in the reports, a somber faced member of my came into the room and caught my attention. “A plane has crashed into the World Trade Center” she informed us. “Was it one of ours?” I asked, knowing we had several flights into New York in the morning. “No, it was a large 767, American Airlines”. Several things go through your mind when you hear something like that. Was it foggy? Were they off course trying to avoid a collision? Did air traffic control make a huge mistake? I asked her to get some more details and continued with the meeting.

A few minutes later she returned with a shocked look on her face. “A second aircraft has hit the Trade Center”. At that, we all jumped from our seats and headed for the manager’s office where CNN was on. There we stood in stark silence as we watched the video over and over again of the hits. Then they report the Pentagon strike and seconds later the phone rang-the FAA was closing the nation’s air space.

A good staff of people moved quickly into action-we only suspected terrorist attacks but we knew we had thousands of people we were responsible for, and we were open to attack. A thousand details were looked after in just a few hours. The airport and seaport were secured, alternate transportation was arranged, the City and State were on alert and we were secure. Ships arrived with passengers who were at sea during the attack and people, many from New York, were looking for information. I vividly remember the stunned silence of the 800 people who came off the Scotia Prince that night-800 people, and no one uttered a word. They had come off a ship and had entered a nation that had changed forever. Sometime later that night, or maybe even the next morning, I was able to put my head on my pillow at home and sink into a restless sleep. The images were still fresh in my mind, the planes hitting their targets, the buildings collapsing, the confusion among government officials, the press questions, the scores of police waiting for the ships and patrolling our facilities, the fate of those I know who worked at the World Trade Center.

The phone rang-I tried to clear my head and focus on what was being asked. A reporter, can I confirm or deny that two of the hijackers came through Portland? Had the FBI spoken with me, do you know what airline they used? Why did they come through Portland? Will you meet us for a live interview at 5AM, what can you tell us? And then I saw the picture of them passing through the Jetport and in me the hate welled up. How could I ever consider forgiving these animals. And yet, we hear Christ talking to us in the midst of even the most terrible crime. But do we allow him to speak to us when it touches close to home?

You know what I mean. We always seem to be keeping score, maintaining an up-to-date tally on what so-and-so has done to get under our skin. And most of the time, we claim that this so-and-so is on the verge of receiving no more mercy from us. Just give ear to the threats we utter: "I've had it 'up to here' with your mouth," or "If that happens one more time, I'm gonna blow my stack," or "I'm sick and tired of stomaching your foolish antics." Time's up, in other words; you've cussed me out one too many times, gone back to the bottle too often, humiliated me beyond what I can bear. The well of forgiveness for you has run bone dry.

That is Peter's question to Jesus. We might demand more detail, with different limits for different sins: "Lord, how often shall my husband cheat on me, and I forgive him?"

Just once?" or "Lord, how often shall my employee steal from me, and I forgive him? Twice?" We want to know when to stop forgiving and when to start holding grudges.

But Jesus will have none of that: Jesus might just as well have answered Peter's question with a question of His own: 'Peter, how often shall you sin against Me and I forgive you?'

And then along comes the parable. A king is settling accounts with his servants. A certain fellow has a debt hanging over his head, a debt he is not able to pay. The king demands that the debtor and all that he has be sold and payment made. Falling on his face, the debtor begs, "Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all." And then, in a shocking reversal, the master compassionately releases him and forgives the debt. No payment plan, no reduced interest, nothing but sheer grace. The debt is erased from the books, as the king pronounces, "Go, you are free."

And what does this man then do who has been loved by the king and freed from his debt? He immediately hunts down one of his fellow servants in hatred and enslaves him. Finding this man who owes him a few dollars, he grabs him by the throat, growling; "Pay me what you owe!" Falling on his face, the debtor begs, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all." And, then, in a shocking reversal of the mercy he had received, the man showed no compassion, but threw his fellow servant behind bars until he should pay the debt. St. Augustine rightly says, "The man refused to give what was given to himself." He who had received mercy showed no mercy.

But word reaches the King quickly. "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" And in anger, the master delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due.

Then, just in case we don't get it, Jesus wraps up the parable with these hard words: "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses." Now, if it seems that Jesus is calling us to forgive our neighbor as often as God forgives us; if it seems that our Lord is calling us to be as merciful, compassionate, and loving toward our neighbor as He is toward those who sin against Him; if it seems as if Christ is telling us never to hold grudges, never to seek revenge, always to forgive . . . then we understood Jesus perfectly well. Forgiveness without boundaries, without stipulations, without hesitation, without regret: that's precisely what Jesus means. That's His charge to us as His followers.

It is also a reminder to bestow that which has already been bestowed upon us, bestowed in abundance. The forgiveness with which the Lord has filled our ears is to overflow from your mouth into the ears of others.

Let's not however think ourselves righteous. If we cannot see the immensity of our sin-debt; then we have mastered the art of self-delusion, of whittling down the forest of our sins until our eyes behold only a few twigs here and there. But the Lord sees truly, and truly His law condemns us for grievances beyond number. Before God we plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer.

And how does our Lord respond when we plead guilty? He cancels the debt. He is always more eager to forgive than we are to confess. He calls debtors before Him not because He expects them to pay up, but because He wants an opportunity to absolve. The debtors tremble as if stepping before a cruel judge, but discover instead a compassionate Father. For such is the nature of the God who is love, who demonstrates His own love toward us in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The debt we owe God does not go unpaid; it is paid, paid in full, not with gold or silver, but with the holy, precious blood of Christ. Our debt is reckoned to the account of Christ. He becomes what we owe, is transformed into the debt itself, and, having paid the price, proclaims, "It is finished. The debt is taken care of. You are forgiven."

It is this forgiveness which must matter for us when our brother sins against us. In the prayer our Lord taught us to pray, we petition our Father to forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. The noted reformer Martin Luther says "We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven

would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us for how can we do otherwise?"

In Psalm 130 we hear, "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared." The marking of iniquities is not the way of our Lord. His is the way of forgiving and forgetting iniquities, the way of mercy, not revenge. He never tires of absolving you, for He never tires of creating. And that is what absolution is, an act of creation. When, through the priest's mouth, Christ says, "Have mercy upon you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins," He is creating us as a new person, a holy, sinless, perfect person, an icon of Himself; for He is putting Himself into us through His words of absolution. If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation, and each man is in Christ and Christ is in him through the forgiveness by which Christ bestows Himself. We have died, and it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us; so, it is no longer we who show mercy, we who forgive, but Christ who shows mercy and who forgives in us.

In the ancient church, before the communicants received the Sacrament, they exchanged a kiss of peace. The lips which would soon kiss the flesh and blood of Christ first kissed those with whom they were to become one body and one blood. It was truly a kiss with the lips of the heart, which was at peace with the neighbor. That is the kind of peace which Christ bestows—a peace which to only makes us children of our Father but brothers and sisters in the family of our Holy Mother, the Church. It is the peace of absolution, of reconciliation, of unity; of the forgiven and the forgiving. It is the peace that passes all human understanding and passes over all the offenses of others, not seven times, but seventy times seven. AMEN