

Sermon Proper 19A 2017

Genesis 50:15-21

Psalms 103:8-13

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

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As our journey through Matthew's gospel continues, it's crunch time. Jesus is getting ever closer to the end of his three year practicum with the disciples. The lessons on the cost of discipleship are going deeper and getting more personal and difficult. Several weeks ago, Jesus invited us to deny ourselves and pick up our cross and follow him into mission. (Mt. 16:24) Jesus sent his disciples into the mission field without much of the baggage that usually accompanies us on journeys. Jesus sent his disciples out two by two without extra clothing or belongings. They weren't to be worried about what they carried with them and neither are we.

And over the past two weeks, we heard that includes emotional baggage as well. If you thought going out without much was hard, we saw some witness of this reality as people entered storm shelters during the hurricanes with only what they could carry in their arms. Jesus calls us to travel even lighter. Even without the things we can't usually see but which can weigh us down significantly. Such as prior disappointing relationships, interactions, hurt, pain, experiences of failure, etc.

Last Sunday, Jesus addressed how disciples are to handle the times when others sinned against or hurt them. His teaching called us to draw upon our emotional intelligence and maturity in response. And his call is remarkable. "If another one sins...." If we have been hurt, we have to go not to others but to the person who hurt us and confront them, have a conversation with them. Do you realize how you hurt me by what you said or did?

Now Jesus is not speaking of events of violence. We are not to go and confront those who threatened or attacked us physically. In those cases we are to call the authorities. But that too involves our telling the story of what happened and facing those who hurt us potentially in a courtroom someday.

If when we go to the one who sinned against us, they don't listen, we don't get to spread the story far and wide, no, we are to take one or two others and go back and confront the person again. This is no easy task.

We are tempted to take the emotionally immature response and tell others instead of confronting the offender. In Family Systems Theory, that is called triangling. By telling others of our distress, we thereby pass some of our emotional distress off on them. We are soothed in the telling and retelling and diffusing/sharing our pain with others. We do this all the time. Someone says or does something that hurts us and what do we do? Do we go back to that person? Not usually, instead we share the experience with a friend. We do this because this strategy can work, temporarily at least. But Jesus would have us walk another path.

So, Jesus' teaching last week, set up Peter asking Jesus today's question on forgiveness. How often are we to forgive another? Peter offered what he thought was an extremely generous 7 times. Only to be answered by Jesus with a seemingly impossible number of 77 times. "However, the exact number of times is not the point here. Jesus is saying that there is to be no cutoff point on forgiveness. The spirit of forgiveness should so pervade our lives that we simply lose count of how many times we have been required to forgive." (Synthesis, 9/17/2017, p. 1).

We are to forgive because we have been forgiven greatly. That is the point of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant that followed.

But why did Jesus give us such a large number of times? I don't believe that Jesus was calling us to go back again into harmful situations and relationships, thus allowing ourselves to be hurt over and over. I don't think that is what Jesus had in mind. I think Jesus knew just how hard genuine forgiveness is to live into. It's never a one and done thing. The next day or week or month the experience will come to mind. We must confront the impact the recurring thoughts have on us if we are truly to forgive. When the memories recur, we must forgive all over again.

Jesus is calling us to let go of the experiences of our past that hold us back. We are to let go of nursing old hurts and pain. Now, the sin and its pain were real and significant. But Jesus wants us to decide whether we will continue to hold on or let go.

Letting go always brings back to me the experience of those of the Amish faith. Living in KY for seven years brought me in close contact with a large Amish community. While there, the October 2, 2006 tragedy at Nickel Mines, PA

occurred. A deranged young man, Charlie Roberts, entered a one room school house. He sent the boys and teacher out and then barricaded himself inside with 10 girls. As police approached, he shot all 10, killing 5 before taking his own life. The event shocked the nation.

How the Amish community responded to this tragedy was remarkable. Immediately, the Amish went to the home of the killer's widow, Marie Roberts and her 3 young children, and offered their forgiveness and support. Her husband had killed himself and could not ask their forgiveness. Yet, even without reciprocation they forgave.

When their response to the horrific experience was broadcast it was received with mistrust and derision. Many felt that forgiving someone after such brutality was not possible or desirable. The Amish should know better. But their response has been studied by social scientists Donald Kraybill and others and detailed in the book, *Amish Grace*. They studied this because they too wanted to know how forgiveness could be offered so soon and be sustained.

What they learned is that the Amish forgive out of their deep faith and dependence on God's great mercy. They are biblical literalists and they follow the Lord's Prayer to the T. They believe that to the degree that they forgive the sins of others, God will forgive their sins. Literally.

Scholars express it this way. Forgiveness in Matthew is not only relational, it is reciprocal and reliant. When teaching his disciples to pray, Jesus would have us say, "forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Mt. 6:12) Reciprocal meaning we cannot have forgiveness without granting forgiveness. That's reciprocal.

Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer says, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." So, today we are using Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. Trespasses can seem difficult to define, but sins rings clearer.

The Amish have learned a lot from practicing forgiveness. Each day on getting up, they have to forgive all over again. When the hurt and pain of loss and violation recur, and they will, they have a choice and they realize this. They believe rather than nursing that hurt, they are to forgive again and again. Maybe that is what Jesus meant by saying that we must forgive 77 times. Jesus knows that forgiveness is not a one and done event. The pain and hurt will resurface and when it does we must choose to forgive again. Or we can bottle it up and have it recur in ways we simply may not recognize but which may cripple us emotionally for life.

But to forgive is not to say we forgive and forget. Because we never forget, the experience and the memory will recur, as it inevitably will, and then we must forgive again. Again and again. 77 times or more.

We experience something of this in the Eucharist each week. At the end of the first half of the service, the Liturgy of the Word, we say the confession together. Then we are granted absolution. This is followed by exchanging the peace. We have asked for forgiveness and then we model the mercy that God has shown us in forgiveness by reaching out and exchanging peace with our neighbors. This is tangible witness of our desire to be in relationship with one another.

But we don't stop there. As the Eucharistic Prayer is drawing to a close we say together the Lord's Prayer. We join together in once again expressing our dependence on God and our desire to be forgiven as we have forgiven others. We draw together around this table as broken and vulnerable and imperfect as we all are. Yet we are drawn, called forward. We do so having offered together the Lord's Prayer. This morning we have printed Luke's beautiful version of Jesus' prayer so that we may use the version that says "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

This is what we are doing each week as we approach the table. We are called by Jesus into deeper relationship. And then we are connected to one another through the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Joined as we receive holy food for holy people. As we receive the Eucharist, we become who we are the very body of Christ for the world around us.

Forgiveness opens the door. Opens the door to the kind of abundant life captured by our stewardship theme, "Living generously, acting together." "As J. Randall O'Brien has written: 'Forgiving is the only way to be fair to ourselves. For only forgiveness liberates us from a painful past to a brand-new future. Not to forgive is to suffer endlessly the torment of yesterday as both present and future are hopelessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Only forgiveness sets us free.'"