

TRINITY 14: Matthew 18.21-35 (NRSV)

Forgiveness

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' ²² Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

²³ 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." ²⁹ Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

My text today is written in Matthew 18:27:

And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

Forgiveness is one of the most important virtues; but at the same time, it is the most difficult to attain. Even when one struggles through the problem and gets to the point where you think you can forgive – even utter the words – it does not always work. Rabbi David Nelson tells a humorous, but true story, of two brothers who went to their rabbi to settle a longstanding feud. The rabbi got the two to reconcile their differences and shake hands. As they were about to leave, he asked each one to make a wish for the other in honour *Yom Kippur*, the Jewish Day of Atonement. The first brother turned to the other and said, "I wish you what you wish me." At that, the second brother threw up his hands and said, "See, Rabbi, he's starting up again!"

The South Africa I was born and grew up in, descended into violence and bloodshed. Both the state police and the African resistance movements did the most despicable things to each other. When democracy eventually dawned, there was a great deal of hatred. The then Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, revived the African (and I would contend Christian) notion of *ubuntu*. I wrote about this a few months back in *News and Views*, but it is so significant, that I want to spend a few minutes reminding us of this wonderful way of living.

What is *ubuntu*? It is the idea that a person is only really be a person (a self) through other persons. It claims that the idea of a solitary individual is a contradiction because we only really become fully human when we are in relationship with others. As Desmond Tutu put it (and I paraphrase): "I need you with all your giftedness and weakness, so that I can be me with all my giftedness and weakness." At the core of *ubuntu* is the idea of *restorative* justice, because, in addition to the acknowledge wrongdoing, we also need each to forgive each other so we need to be *restored* to each other. How we relate to others defines who we are. *Ubuntu* might be an African concept, but I am convinced that it applies everywhere and that it is in line with the teaching and example of Jesus. Forgiveness is at the core; without it, there can be no hope; no way forward.

In our reading, Peter once more acts as the spokesman for all the disciples asking: '*Must one pardon seven times?*' which is just another way of saying *always*. Matthew is referring back to Genesis where Lamech avenged himself 77 – fold (Genesis 4.24) and as de Dietrich comments, '... to the absolute of vengeance is opposed the absolute pardon.'

Jesus goes on to illustrate this point by using a parable about a debtor who had absolutely no chance of paying off his debt and who is released from his responsibility, but who refused to be as merciful to one who was in his debt. To put it into context, in today's money the difference is between £3 million and £5. And the point being made is this: "How can any Christian, who has received so much from God, ever crush another by refusing to forgive them?" Nothing can compare with the graciousness of God; this means that there is nothing any person can ever do to offend us so greatly, that it means that we ought not to forgive them, because '... one who does not pardon his neighbour excludes himself by that fact from communion with God.' Jesus repeats this teaching several times and, as de Dietrich concludes, makes the point that '... he who shuts out mercy shows that they have understood nothing of the love of God, of the extraordinary pardon of which they themselves are the object' (see 5.7, 43-48; 6.12-15).

This is hard ...

The words are relatively easy to think and even say, and in our minds we know that they are true, but it is difficult, when people have been hurt and degraded in the deepest way, like black people under the Apartheid government in South Africa, where loved ones were brutally tortured and killed, and where some were murdered by necklace killings and other horrors. We realise, in fact, that what Jesus is talking about here is impossible for any human to do. Here too, then, we are totally reliant on God's unmerited and deserved grace, for otherwise it will never happen.

Corrie Ten Boom, the Dutch woman who suffered so heavily at the hands of the Nazis in a concentration camp, gives some insight as to 'How?' She writes of how she had been unable to forget a wrong that had been done to her – the way her older sister had died in the camp. She had forgiven the person, but she kept rehashing the incident and so couldn't sleep. Finally, Corrie cried out to God for help in putting the problem to rest.

"His help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor," Corrie wrote, "to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks." "Up in the church tower," he said, nodding out the window, "is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops. I believe the same

thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down." "And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversations, but the force -- which was my willingness in the matter -- had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at the last stopped altogether: we can trust God not only above our emotions, but also above our thoughts."

We owe so much to Peter's weakness of rushing into speech and being impetuous, because it always resulted in our Lord explaining things so well and clearly, in order to deal with Peter's folly. At the time, Peter's suggestion of 7 times would have appeared generous, because it was Jewish custom to only forgive 3 times, and there is good biblical precedent for this, especially Amos chapter 1. The implication is that on the 4th offence, the offender *must* be punished. It was thought that if God decreed this and behaved in this way, humans could not be expected to do more!

Peter had got what Jesus was saying and wanted clarity; so, he thought he was exaggerating generosity toward sinners: he takes the Rabbinic idea of 3, doubles it and adds another one for good measure. He expected to be praised for his depth of insight and graciousness. There is a sense of eager self-satisfaction in Peter's behaviour.

Jesus replied that Peter is miles off the point, because Christians ought to be willing to place no limit of their forgiveness. Jesus goes on to teach into this situation using a parable and this parable taught certain lessons that, '... Jesus never tired of teaching ...' and I refer to Barclay's commentary to explain these points:

Firstly, Jesus taught that people must forgive in order to be forgiven. We all recall the *Sermon on the Mount* where Jesus taught: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.' This is of course central to the Lord's Prayer: 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive the sins of others.' James also writes: 'For judgement will be without mercy, to anyone who has shown no mercy.'

Secondly, we have already seen how massive the debt of the first servant was. Kennedy explains that nothing that any person can do to us can compare with the debt we owe to God; '... and if God has forgiven us the debt we owe Him, we must forgive others the debts they owe to us.' Barclay adds: 'Nothing that we have to forgive can even faintly or remotely compare with that which we have been forgiven.'

We have been forgiven a debt that is impossible to pay, and so we must forgive as God has forgiven us. We know that it is impossible if we try to do this in our own strength, but God's grace is sufficient for us. But what about ourselves? I am sure I am not alone in finding it most difficult to forgive myself. Karl Menninger, the famed psychiatrist, once said that if he could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75 percent of them could walk out the next day!

Today Jesus provides comfort and hope to all – sinner and sinned against alike - as we read:

'And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.' **Amen.**