

St. Andrew's Cathedral
Jackson, Mississippi
Sermon for September 17, 2017 ~ Proper 19A
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I find it apropos that our lectionary should include the parable about the nature of forgiveness at this particular time of year when our Jewish neighbors stand at the threshold of the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Who knows, perhaps it was the Day of Atonement and the theme of forgiveness of sin that was the backdrop for the conversation between Jesus and Peter in which the parable is set.

This parable is illustrative of the fact that forgiveness is an essential aspect of the Christian experience. Reinhold Niebuhr once said, "Forgiveness is the central issue of Theology." It begins in God's love and is endorsed by it. Therefore, when any one of us forgives, it is done within the context of another forgiveness that possesses immeasurable dimensions. Forgiveness plumbs the depths of our love and assays its quality and will to endure.

I believe the section of Matthew's gospel in which our parable for today is set was written primarily as an early sort of catechism for early Christians. They, and we, are supposed to identify with Peter and his questions, and then learn from Jesus' answers. And in Jesus' answer to Peter, this parable, you and I are to see ourselves as those who have been forgiven but are not very good at forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not natural for humans. We are not supposed to be good at it. Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence, these are natural human qualities. To err, after all, IS human, to forgive divine. It is natural for the human animal to defend itself, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is not a universal human virtue. Forgiveness is the peculiar attribute of a people who know that they have been forgiven.

The courage to forgive one another begins in the humility engendered by the realization that we have been forgiven. If we want to learn what forgiveness means, we are going to have to begin by accepting the forgiveness God offers. This means taking God seriously, believing that God is kindly disposed toward us, and giving up our death grip on the guilt in our lives.

E. Claiborne Jones, in a sermon on this very parable, tells about a man who had been on the outs with the church since his adolescence. Finally, after his family pleaded with him, he gets up the nerve to try church again. He wanders into an Episcopal Church during the middle of the service when the congregation is on its knees praying the General Confession, ". . . We have done those things which we ought not to have done and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done. . . ." and he smiles and says, "Good! They sound like my kind of people."

That's you and that's me. We are in this parable as the forgiven and the unforgiven. And we're in this church as those who have been spectacularly forgiven and loved by Christ on the cross, yet who are ridiculously unforgiven and unloving when it comes to the wrongs we suffer from others.

Forgiveness is a gift, a gift that is first offered to us before we can offer it to others. So every Sunday

the church should remind us that we gather as those who have been forgiven, for that is the way we plan to produce heroic souls who finally learn to forgive others.

During World War II, the Nazis sent the Luftwaffe on a mission to do something that had never been attempted before: to completely annihilate a city by aerial bombardment. Their strategic target was a major English industrial center where their enemies were manufacturing engines and weapons of war, the city of Coventry. On the morning after the horrific bombardment, the mayor and other city leaders came with the bishop and the dean of their beautiful Cathedral to survey the damage. Only the walls were left standing. The roof and all the stone and timber lay scattered and charred. While they discussed the tragedy, the caretaker of the Cathedral quietly went over and lashed two charred pieces of wood together and set them up where the altar had been. Then, he took a piece of charcoal and wrote on the wall of the apse, "Father, forgive." The community leaders were so moved by the action of this humble servant of the Cathedral that their hearts were turned from thoughts of revenge to thoughts of reconciliation. They gathered with others of the community and decided to turn that which was meant for evil into something that God could use for good. They decided to study reconciliation and forgiveness and to organize groups to go to other places torn apart by violence and to help them learn to forgive. Thus was born the community of the cross of nails. The revelation they had received, they wanted to give to others:

To refuse to forgive, is to block the forgiveness God is offering to us. George Herbert once said, "He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass if he would ever reach heaven; for every one has need to be forgiven."

Remember the lines from *The Merchant of Venice*?

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.

For God's forgiveness to be real, we need to learn to be forgiving persons; to establish a new relationship with those around us. I know how it is to be angry. One of the most valuable lessons I've ever learned was in a meeting when we were organizing Omega House, a hospice for terminally ill AIDS patients in Houston. We were discussing how angry some people are and one of those present said, "Anger is such a sumptuous, delicious feast. Until you discover that you are the main course." To savor and nurture anger, resentment, and thoughts of vengeance is to turn away from the healing power of God in our lives. To forgive, is to open spaces up for God's love to enter and accomplish what we could not accomplish on our own.

Yes, that's all very good you say, but there are times when the wrong which has been committed is so bad or has been committed so often that there is no way one can forgive. There is a limit!

But the parable shows us forgiveness is not about mathematics, it is about conduct. Peter wants to know how many times a person is expected to forgive before one no longer is under any binding obligation to forgive. He wants Jesus to quantify forgiveness. By using a mathematically astronomi-

cal number, “seventy times seven,” Jesus tells Peter that forgiveness has no limits. Peter has come to Jesus wanting precise calculation, a statement of reasonable limits on forgiveness of sisters and brothers in the church. The forgiveness being urged is not the result of careful, reasonable calculation. It is extravagant, effusive, without limit. We need to learn to take the limits off our love; to be committed to constantly moving beyond what we had thought to be the very most we were capable of doing.

Let me hasten to say that to forgive another who has truly wronged you does not mean that you must continue to put yourself in harm’s way again and again. Certainly, there may come a time when you have to protect ourselves from those who bring hurt or endangerment into our lives.

Though experience teaches us we must sometimes take ourselves out of harm's way, we can still forgive those who hurt us through the grace of the One who brought forgiveness to us at such a great price. When we think how hard it is to forgive, it is helpful to look at the cross and be reminded that it was not any easier for God. The cross suggests that it was amazingly, tortuously hard and enormously costly. John Morely, commenting on Gladstone's constructive handling of an extortionist, and on his readiness to forgive, summed it all up when he said, “There was no worldly wisdom in it, we all know. But then, what are people Christians for?”

It is not enough to feel the love and forgiveness of God. It is not enough to give some forgiveness to others. What makes the forgiveness of God truly complete is the constant pilgrimage of forgiveness, which moves us beyond the self-imposed limits of love toward God who is both the source and the goal. As Thomas Merton said, “When we extend our hand to the enemy, God reaches out to both of us. For it is God first of all who extends our hand to the enemy” (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, 141).