

Sermon for Sunday, September 14, 2008

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19)

By Tim Ljunggren

First Lesson	Exodus 14:19-31
Psalm	Psalm 114
Second Lesson	Romans 13:1-12
Gospel	Matthew 18:21-35

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

Forgiveness—today, we hear the story of Peter asking Jesus about forgiveness.

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

Peter wants a way out of forgiveness, doesn't he? He sets a numerical value on it, trying to glean from Jesus how much he can get away with without incurring the wrath of God. Surely, if he forgives someone at least seven times, that should be enough. What kind of a God would expect more than that?

Of course, as usual, Peter gets it wrong.

“Not seven times,” Jesus answers Peter, “but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Jesus definitely ups the ante on Peter, doesn't he? As usual, Jesus doesn't let Peter off the hook—despite Peter's idea of how forgiveness is supposed to look, Jesus tells him again that that idea comes nowhere close to God's idea of forgiveness—human ideals, no matter how lofty, are often attempts to justify ourselves and our own motives.

We're told the same thing ourselves this morning.

It's so easy to withhold forgiveness, isn't it? We live in a world where forgiveness does not come easy—if anything, it's the last thing the world thinks about. Forgiveness is tough because, through it and in it, we find ourselves looking into a broken mirror to find only shards of our true reflection. We forgive reluctantly, if

at all—forgiveness only comes about when those whom we need to forgive fall prostrate before us, begging us for our total and complete understanding. Since that rarely—if ever—happens, we feel justified in keeping our need to forgive to ourselves. We feel justified in our anger and our pain and our confusion over how hurt we are that someone has caused us so much grief.

Yet, as always, there's more to Jesus' words than just their surface meaning.

Jesus uses the example of the “wicked slave” as a parable on how we all expect—no, we *demand*—forgiveness for ourselves, but we're ready to deny that same forgiveness to others. We feel justified in our wrath towards others, because we feel that they've let us down in some way or another. We feel cheated, we feel abandoned, we feel scorned—and someone owes us an *apology!*

But here's the thing, and it's a tough thing, indeed—Jesus tells us this morning that no one owes you anything at all, and that the posturing and the pleading and the procrastination that's all a part of our need to be forgiven and to forgive comes from God and God alone.

Period.

I don't know about all of you, but there have been times in my life where forgiveness was the last thing on my mind. Rightly or wrongly, I have been hurt by people and circumstances that demand from me a certain response; to feel justified, I need to show my rage, my hurt, my pain in ways that can only lead to further rage, hurt, and pain.

That's the nature of our humanness, isn't it?

Forgiveness is tough—in fact, it's so tough that we can don't it all on our own. We need help to navigate it, and we need help to sort it all out.

That's where God comes in.

God realizes the limitations of our humanness; he doesn't hold those limitations against us—indeed, he *forgives* us for those limitations—but he expects us to constantly do better with ourselves and our reactions to our circumstances. That's why Jesus' parable about the wicked slave is so poignant to all of use this

morning—without fail, we ourselves have acted just like the wicked slave, and we've been blinded to our own need for assurance and retribution.

Yet, God forgives us everyday, whether or not we deserve—or even want—that forgiveness. As Jesus reminds Peter in today's gospel lesson, forgiveness is not something to be taken lightly; it forms the foundation from which the rest of our faith is built. Without that foundation, we're nothing more than self-serving people in pursuit of our own agendas. This is especially true when our hurts are real and unforgettable.

Ironically, in the end, forgiveness is about letting ourselves off of the hook. It's about not holding on to those feelings that poison us and make us stray from God's word. It's about allowing the scales of our own justice to remain unbalanced as we seek to find a higher ground—a higher purpose—for our lives. It's about forgiving others, but it's also about forgiving ourselves—just as God does. It's about trying to retain an attitude of grace, love, and abundance rather than hate, apathy, and scarcity.

How many times should we forgive?

Do the math. ...

Amen.

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