

Mat 18:21-35 – “Forgiven, and Forgiving”

Well, it's nice to be back! Apart from a disastrous trip to China that was like an early Jackie Chan movie, and taking a full ThM course in 2 weeks, I had a fairly relaxing time. I watched a lot of TV, mostly summer reruns – managed to catch just about every episode of Sex and the City, CSI, and Law and Order. I'm particularly fascinated with Law and Order, as it offers a glimpse into the American legal system, a system that always seems to me to be more about revenge than justice – so much so that I often think that many in the States could not even comprehend the distinction between the two.

I was reminded about that distinction by the course I took in July from the Rev. Dr. Martin Brokenleg about Reclaiming Youth at Risk. During the course I had opportunity to reflect upon the work that I have done in the Alternative Measures Program of our Youth Justice System, and to recall that one key component of those programs was for the Young Offender to offer a sincere apology. At the heart of that action was the hope, often fulfilled, that the Young Offender would consider the victim or victims, and seek a sense of forgiveness. I'm happy to say that some $\frac{3}{4}$ of the young people who were able to take part in that program used that opportunity to “go, and sin no more”, finding in that ‘forgiveness’ a chance to reclaim their lives.

Of course, all of this reminiscing is triggered by the topic of our gospel reading for today, the essence which seems pretty simple: a short question and answer between Peter and Jesus, followed by a parable. The topic is forgiveness, in particular continuing the theme of forgiving someone who is a brother or sister in the faith. In last week's gospel reading we saw how scripture encourages us to take measured steps when someone in the faith has sinned against us, steps that escalated to a surprising conclusion of acceptance and tolerance, which hint at forgiveness. In fact, this whole section in Matthew's gospel started with a question and answer session that led to a message of acceptance. The disciples came to Jesus and asked Him, “who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”, to which He replied by putting a little child among them, declaring that whoever was as humble as the innocent child was the greatest, and went on to also declare that whoever received [accepted] such a child in His name also welcomed Him. Jesus then moved on to point out the severe danger of putting a stumbling block in the path of such a little one, which in turn led to the parable of leaving the 99 sheep to find the one who had strayed – another powerful example of forgiveness and acceptance on one who had sinned. That led into last week's reading about reproving and recovering one who had sinned, which in turn leads to today's question about forgiveness.

And lest there be any doubt, the message of the text, especially from the parable of the unforgiving servant, is that forgiveness is vitally important! That concluding statement about what will happen to those who do not forgive is frightening, isn't it? The threat of dire and everlasting consequences for not forgiving rings out painfully clear. It's a bit like the closing statement to a good, old-fashioned, pulpit-thumping fire and brimstone sermon, punctuating a teaching session with a dreadful threat. But how did we ever get from the gentle, loving tolerance and forgiveness of a child or a lost lamb to such a harsh and blood-curdling threat? I think the exaggeration of the examples in the parable is for emphasis.

Exaggeration? Certainly! This parable is not meant to be taken as an incident that actually happened, but is instead meant to convey a point of understanding, and so great (even unbelievable) exaggeration is used. For example, take the amount that the

first slave owed the king, namely 10,000 talents. Assuming a rough estimate that one talent was the equivalent of fifteen years wages, and taking an average wage of \$30,000 per year, this works out to about five hundred billion dollars – quite a loan for a slave – indeed, almost enough to rebuild New Orleans – the slave, being forgiven so much, surely must have heaved a sigh of relief!!

By comparison, the loan owed to the first slave by the second works out to about \$10,000 in today's terms – a not insignificant amount, but one that is possible to repay, although we can sympathize with the second slave's plea for some time to cough up the money. And so too we feel the expected anger towards the first slave who, having just been let off the hook for an amount almost a million times greater (well, only half a million times greater if you've done the math, but half a million doesn't read so well, so I've rounded up!), refuses to budge and throws the other into debtor's prison. I think most of us utter at least a quiet 'yesss!' when the unkind and unforgiving slave is ratted on by the other slaves, and receives due justice from the king, being thrown himself into debtor's prison and even tortured until he can pay off the full half-trillion dollars.

Talk about exaggeration! Think for a moment about the concept of debtor's prison – you're in jail, where you are busy being tortured, and thus unavailable for work, which means you aren't eligible for EI benefits, so you have no income whatsoever. At the average salary we used above of \$30,000 per year, it would take just under 50 million working days (6 per week) to gross the half-trillion – and that's approximately 150,000 years, give or take a millennia or two! The actual time required to repay the loan is half-a-million days divided by daily income, but since there's no income at all while being tortured in the king's debtor's prison, then the time is half-a-million divided by zero, which as Philip would confirm is an infinitely large number (as if 150,000 years isn't!).

So, from our analysis, it's abundantly clear that:

1. the first slave owes an impossible amount, and is forgiven the entire amount
2. the same slave is owed little, but does not forgive even a penny
3. that ungrateful wretch suffers forever

and we can readily reach the intended conclusion that it is infinitely better to forgive than not to forgive. As I said, forgiving is definitely important!

And while we can nod in agreement that forgiving is important, we also can agree, I think, that it is really, really hard to do. We return quickly from the unreal world of the parable to the real world in which we live, a world seemingly full of injustice, of people who demand much and give little, of people who seem to abuse forgiveness, to soak it up like a battery recharge on the way to the next "sinning against", and we ask, like Peter, how many times do we forgive the sister or brother in faith who sins against us. Peter apparently heard the unusual message that the 'final' step in dealing with such a person was to treat them with tolerance and acceptance, which implied forgiving them. It's simply not possible to tolerate someone, let alone accept them, if there is some smoldering resentment burning under the surface, because the heat of that resentment almost always erupts in a fiery display of hatred and vengeance. Peter heard, and obviously understood, that continuing, ongoing forgiveness was being called for, and he realized how difficult that could and would be. "How many times?" he asks.

Now to be truly precise, he actually asks "how often?", which is a different question, dealing with the rate or frequency of forgiving, and he gets an answer couched instead in terms of amounts, but the point works out to be the same. Indeed, Peter

himself switched the topic from “how often” to “how many” by suggesting a number. It’s possible to hear Peter asking this question the way we might, a bit tongue-in-cheek. You know, using a number that was more than double the current rabbinical standard of three times, asking with perhaps a tad of sarcasm, “(as many as) seven times?”. I prefer to think of Peter, having caught the message that tolerance and acceptance implied forgiveness, was genuinely attempting to stretch the limit to a much more acceptable number.

Most of us are familiar with Jesus’ reply, although due to a bad translation many centuries ago many people know it as “seventy times seven” instead of the “seventy-seven” that was actually written. Whichever, given how hard it is to forgive, sometimes seven times seems as difficult or even impossible as does seventy-seven or seventy times seven (just shy of 500!). Most of us feel that any number greater than one is not acceptable – you know the “fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me” kind of feeling that to forgive more than once means we are somehow being conned, used or even abused. Being sensitive to being thus conned, limiting ourselves to forgiving someone three times seems more than anyone should be asked, and so seven seems divinely good, and anything above that utterly impossible.

How can we resolve that feeling with Jesus’ command to forgive such an impossible number of times? Well, as in many a math problem, the trick is to invert the problem, to turn it upside-down, which often suggests a solution. Here, instead of considering someone else who needs forgiveness, consider yourself, kind of a “forgiveness begins at home” approach. How often do you need to be forgiven? Any of us who can be truly honest with ourselves will not only know but can accept that our need to be forgiven is truly great, is truly a very large number.

How much forgiveness is available to you? Without faith, not much. You are limited to how much you can forgive yourself, and how much forgiveness you can receive from others. But with faith in God, especially understanding His grace and mercy offered through the death and resurrection of Christ, gives us a new perspective on the amount of forgiveness offered freely by God. Since we know God’s power to be without limit, we can safely assume that there is no limit to His grace. As St. Paul says, reconciliation and forgiveness is “freely offered by God in Christ”.

Now, apply this to yourself: you are forgiven by God, with scads and gobs left over. Take just a bit of that surplus, and forgive yourself. Go ahead, that’s part of what “accepting Christ” means – it is largely about understanding the unlimited forgiveness from God available to you in Christ, and scooping up some of that forgiveness flowing over you, and putting it to good purpose, beginning with forgiving yourself. Not merely a superficial reassuring “I’m OK, I’m OK” kind of self-transactional analysis, but finally finding the power, strength and truth from Christ to confront those parts of you that you would rather forget, and coming to terms with them forever. That is the beginning also of the true freedom that is available in Christ, release from the chains of self that have bound us all, and still do.

The hope, of course, and the promise, is that freed from the weaknesses of self, from all those things within you that generate fear and anger, and that filled with an over-abundance of forgiveness you will be able to spill that forgiveness upon others with something approaching the quantities of which Jesus spoke. You cannot really respond to his command to forgive others without limit unless and until you have been able to

accept his forgiveness of you and for you. But once you have accepted God's forgiveness offered in Christ, and have begun to forgive yourself, you can indeed begin to savour the true freedom of forgiving others their sins against you.

The essence of this reading is indeed clear - you are forgiven by God in Christ, forgiven with a love and grace that knows no bounds, forgiven beyond your wildest dreams. The implication is as simple and as clear: forgive others, as he has forgiven you.