

Matthew 18:21-35

September 11, 2001. Exactly four years ago today. It was the worst attack in American History; worse than Pearl Harbor, and it burned into our brains a series of heart breaking images that will stay with us forever. The Twin Towers falling. A hole in the middle of the Pentagon. The brave people on Flight 93. A fire-fighter carrying away a flag-draped victim. The twisted rubble of Ground Zero. We are living in a post 9/11 world today, a world increasingly marked by hate and revenge, fear and resentment. And if that is not disturbing enough in the past year we have seen two natural disasters, a tsunami in the Indian Ocean that took 200,000 lives and of course hurricane Katrina in the Gulf-the single largest natural disaster in American history. I know that on many of your minds in this question is “where is God in all this?” It is a question however difficult that deserves an answer and it will be the topic of my sermon next Sunday.

Today I would like to address my remarks on a topic that certainly weaves itself into these issues I have mentioned as well as many other issues in our personal lives-and that is the crucial issue of forgiveness.

So, let’s take a look at Matthew 18:21-35 using the famous Fishwick Authorized Version:

God wants to see me-I’m in big time debt and can’t pay it off; based on the facts, I get the thumbs down-out you go says the big guy, off the property. I fall on my knees pleading for mercy, “Give me another chance. I’ll pay you back,” And the big guy in his great compassion and mercy forgives my debt. So what do I do? Feeling all puffed up with all kinds of selfish motives go to visit my servant, a young Dutchman from a strange far away country named mich-i-gan. I get on a ladder and seize him by the throat and say, pay what you owe me-which was far less than I owed the big guy but nonetheless not an inconsiderable amount of money. When the tall mich-i-gander couldn’t pay up, I called the bishop and had him defrocked, and fired him. However when the faithful members of Christ Church saw what I had done to my assistant they bypassed the bishop and went right to the big guy and told him what I had done. Needless to say, the big guy was not too happy with my refusal to show the same mercy to my tall assistant that he had shown me. And so he had me tortured by making me root for the Yankees until I could pay off my debt-which I never could of course.

So, a little bit of levity here but the point is that forgiveness is at the heart of who God is-what he has done for us in fact in Christ. The parable points to Good Friday. After we had stripped Jesus of his dignity, after a fixed trial in which everything was done according to the law, we dragged him up a hill, nailed his hands and feet and crucified him. And as he hung there bleeding to death, he looked down at us, and the redeemer of the world said, “Father, forgive them.” We have been forgiven. Radically forgiven. The debt which we could never repay has been taken care of. And the expectation is that we forgive those as we have been forgiven. I’m sure no one here this morning believes that Jesus would teach his followers a prayer that includes these words, ‘forgive us our trespasses (debts) as we forgive those who trespass against us’ that had no implications for how they lived their lives. Those are not just pretty words.

The parable of the unforgiving servant has some profound implications for our lives. Let’s name two:

1) Every time you accuse someone else, you accuse yourself. Every time you forgive someone else, though, you pass on a drop of water out of the bucketful that God has already given you. From God’s point of view, the distance between being ordinarily sinful (what we all are) and extremely sinful (what the people we don’t like seem to be) is like the distance between Charlottesville and Richmond seen from the point of view of the sun.

The key thing is not that one should therefore swallow all resentment and ‘forgive and forget’ as though nothing had happened. The key thing is that one should never, ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation one’s goal. If confrontation has to happen, as it often does, it must always be with forgiveness in mind, never revenge.

2) But underneath that there is another lesson, more subtle perhaps but equally important. Jesus says in this parable that those who refuse to forgive will themselves be refused forgiveness. Isn’t that, to put it bluntly, so harsh as to be out of keeping with the rest of the gospel? Can’t God override our failings at exactly that point?

Apparently not. At least, I don’t know about ‘can’t’, but it seems that he won’t. The New Testament speaks with one voice on this subject. Forgiveness isn’t like a Christmas present that a kindly grandfather can go ahead and give to a sulky grandchild even if the grandchild hasn’t bought a

single gift for anyone else. It isn't like the meal that will be waiting for you back home even if you failed to buy a cheese sandwich and a coke for a homeless person on the street. It's a different sort of thing altogether.

Forgiveness is more like the air in your lungs. There's only room for you to inhale the next lungful when you've just breathed out the previous one. If you insist on withholding it, refusing to give someone else the kiss of life they may desperately need, you won't be able to take any more in yourself and you will suffocate very quickly. Whatever the spiritual, moral, and emotional equivalent of the lungs may be—it's either open or closed. If it's open, able and willing to forgive others, it will also be open to receive God's love and forgiveness. But if it's locked up to the one, it will be locked up to the other.

It's a difficult lesson to learn, in our thinking and in our acting. It goes back to my sermon a few weeks ago of learning how to think and act inside out; at the beginning of chapter 18 Matthew, Jesus teaches the disciples that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one who has been turned inside out, and becomes humble like a child.

The life and experience of Frenchwoman Irene Laure gives us an example of what I am talking about. She had been in the Resistance in World War II when the Germans occupied France. Her son had been tortured and executed. At the end of the war she had wanted Germany wiped from the face of the earth. She was elected to the French parliament, and ironically invited to be a part of the French delegation to a conference in Switzerland dealing with the reconstruction of Europe. Laure was horrified to find Germans there. She threatened to leave but a friend asked her this question: how can you rebuild Europe without the Germans? She retired to her room and thought long and hard about whether would give up her hatred for the sake of the new Europe. The next morning she publicly asked the German delegation to forgive her for her hatred. Later a German woman came up to Laure and took her hand. Irene said it felt like 100 kilos were being lifted off her shoulders. Later she went to Germany and repeated her apology, and everywhere she went Germans were willing, as a result to face up to their past, often for the first time. Irene Laure came to see the truth that nothing in world, not even the cruelties of war cause so much destruction of normal conditions of life or are the cause of so much ruin and evil as the spirit of hatred.

In conclusion, this parable gives us yet another insight to the new ways that God has brought into the world through His son, Jesus. Ways that are available to you and me. As the prophet Jeremiah saw half a millennium earlier (Jeremiah 31:34), the way of life which will mark out that new covenant is forgiveness. Jesus specified clearly in his Sermon on the Mount that if you want forgiveness you've got to be prepared to give it. Sermon on the Mount. (Matt 6:14-15)

Peter's question in verse 21 says it all. If you're still counting how many times you've forgiven someone, you're not really forgiving them at all, but simply postponing revenge. 'Seventy times seven' is a typical bit of Jesus' teasing. What he means, of course, is 'don't even think about counting; just do it.'