

Proper 19A, September 13, 2020 - St. Anne's
Ex 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

In today's gospel reading Peter asks Jesus how *many times* he should forgive someone - as many as **seven** times? He's clearly trying to be incredibly *generous*. But Jesus says no, not just **seven**, but seventy-seven, or as the Greek can also be translated seventy **times** seven. In other words, there's *no limit* to forgiveness. And then he tells a parable. We often miss the humour in this parable so let me give you a modern version... A low-level data entry clerk gets called into the office of the head of the company. Up the elevator and through the big double doors. His boss looks at him and says, "You owe me five *billion* dollars." "Uh, yes sir. I do." "I want my money!" "Oh, yes sir! Absolutely!" "I want my money **now!**" "Umm, yah, well I don't have the money right now. Just give me a little bit more time. Another *month* or two and I'll pay you back!" The boss raises an eyebrow and looks at him dubiously. "Uh-huh..." And then he and the company lawyers start a discussion about prosecution and jail times and how much of the money could be recouped by selling all the clerk's possessions. The clerk falls on his knees and begs his boss for mercy. "Please, I'll be ruined and my kids won't be able to go to college. Please, be merciful!" The boss pauses and then says, "Well, ok, I'll tell you what, I'll write off the 5 billion." The clerk leaves feeling stunned and elated. But then of course, he meets a fellow clerk who owes **him** \$1,000. And we know what happens don't we. He won't forgive the debt and he ends up ruined and in jail after all.

Jesus uses this story to illustrate the impossibly *huge* level of forgiveness he's commanding us to. The original hearers of this parable would have laughed when the servant asks for just a bit more time to pay back the 10,000 talents. **10,000** talents was the equivalent of about 150,000 year's wages for a worker. *King Herod*

only received about **900** talents a year from all his territories. So, Jesus' original hearers would have *easily* gotten the point that this is about forgiveness without limits. Forgiveness as a way of *being*.

In Matthew's gospel, Peter's question immediately follows last week's reading about disagreements and conflict. Into this discussion about the inevitable conflicts that arise within communities, Peter asks how wide our forgiveness should be. How many times must I be slighted before I can say '*enough*'? How many times do I have to forgive before my reservoir of grace can be slammed shut? It's a very human question. We all know the ways, both big and small, that others can hurt us. We know the ways others can take advantage of our generosity or our good nature. We all know the sting of consistent affront. Forgiveness can be one of the most difficult of human acts, not only to give but also, if we're honest, to *receive*. So, Peter's suggestion of forgiving someone **seven** times seems generous to us too. After all, *second chances* are rare in our lives, let alone **seventh** ones.

But then Jesus says, 'you're asking the wrong question'. There **is** no scorecard. There is **no** limit to the amount of forgiving you are called to do. Because forgiveness is an expression of the love that binds communities and societies together. Forgiveness is **not** about regulating other people's behaviour but rather about maintaining and nurturing our relationships. And, according to Jesus, forgiveness is not just a *good idea* for the maintenance of relationships and communities, it's not just a 'nice thing' – it's a **necessity**.

Now, just let me pause here and be clear. The importance of forgiveness does **not** mean we're called to be door-mats. And it **absolutely** doesn't mean we should put up with *abusive* behaviour. Forgiving someone **doesn't** mean they shouldn't face

the natural consequences of the wrong they've done. Nor does forgiving someone mean you should necessarily *trust* them again, or act as if nothing happened. If someone is *repeatedly* unkind or hurtful, let alone mean-spirited or *violent*, we **should** put some distance between us. **But**, forgiveness **does** mean what they've done doesn't *completely define* our relationship with that other person, only how we *conduct* the relationship in order to be physically and emotionally safe. For example, we can continue to love a child or sibling or spouse or friend who is abusive, but we don't have to, and **shouldn't**, put up with abusive behavior. Indeed, often the most loving and forgiving thing to do may very well **be** to **stop** putting up with the behavior. Because as long as we *enable* their behavior they are not likely to stop.

All of which brings us to the rather harsh ending of the parable. It seems the only thing the forgiving king **can't** forgive is the *inability* of others to forgive as they've been forgiven. *But*, keep in mind that this is a *parable*, and therefore lives in the world of 'parabolic exaggeration'. **No one** is actually **able** to live up to Jesus' seventy-times-seven kind of forgiveness. If we tried to take this literally we'd **all** be doomed. So, one way to understand this parable is to imagine that the king is really only describing the condition the unforgiving servant *already* lives in. That is, despite the *kings'* efforts to *free* him, the unforgiving servant remains a *slave* to the world of counting and calculating and reckoning. And so, the king is merely acknowledging the reality that the servant already **is**, and will *remain*, a **prisoner** to that way of being until the end of time...**or** until **he** can forgive others, whichever comes first.

Forgiveness is ultimately a decision about the **past**. As Diane Cirincione said "Forgiveness is giving up all hope for a better **past**." In other words, forgiveness is

accepting that you cannot *change the past* - **and** that you don't have to let the past hold you *captive*. When you forgive, you *release* the past so you can enter into an open future. Because when you *cannot* let go of the past, you remain captive to it. Forgiveness, in this sense, **is** freedom, freedom *from* the past, freedom *for* the future. And **this** is the freedom God wants for *each* of us. That's the essence of forgiveness: the lifting of a burden, the releasing of a debt that *cannot* ever be collected anyway, the refusal to allow past actions and failures to define the future.

But, that's **not** to say it's *easy* to forgive. Sometimes the pain is too big and we're just not *able* to forgive something. Or we *think* we've let it go and then it pops up again. But at its **best**, forgiveness is not a one-time response, it's part of who we **are**. When Peter asks about how many times to forgive, Jesus says forgiveness is to be ingrained as a way of being. When we're hurt, **seven** times can seem impossible. Sometimes **once** seems too hard. Seventy times seven is beyond imagining! And that's the *point*. Forgiveness at *that* level requires us to have an ingrained *habit* of forgiveness where our actions are no longer conscious *choice* but a reflex - part of our way of being in this world. And only **God** can help us with forgiveness at that level.

Forgiveness, like love, can't be commanded or forced. But we **can** *pray* for it - pray for the *ability* to forgive those who've hurt us, pray for the *desire* to forgive, pray for the ability to forgive **ourselves** for **our** failures and shortcomings. And we can pray for the grace to *accept* the forgiveness of others when it's extended to us.

So, in the minute of silence after my sermon and I invite you to call to mind one person **you** are having a hard time forgiving. It could be something that's currently happening in your life or something from the past. Either way, I invite you to

spend the minute in prayer asking for the *courage and ability* to forgive them. The courage and *desire* to let go of the burden, release the debt, and refuse to allow past actions and failures to define **your** future. One minute – starting now.