

# Sermon for Year A, Proper 19

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

What can be more wonderful than to be forgiven by God or by someone else we've hurt? Nothing else clears the air better and makes us close again to someone than to be forgiven by them or to forgive them ourselves. Prompt forgiveness is precisely what's needed so much in our community, our nation and in our world, where relationships between many people are at breaking-point. Whole-hearted forgiveness could save many a marriage, bridge any generation gaps in a family, heal resentment between relatives, restore harmony between employers and employees, and promote peace and warmth between church members.

Why then, is it so hard to ask for forgiveness from someone we've hurt or to forgive someone who's offended us? We can be tempted to think that there ought to be a limit to how merciful and forgiving we have to be to someone who, again and again, makes us angry. Surely, many people argue: "At some point, justice must limit forgiveness!" It's this idea Jesus opposes in today's Gospel reading.

In our text, Peter comes to Jesus with what he believes is a big-hearted suggestion. The Jewish teachers had said that three times was a sufficient number of times to forgive someone. Peter thinks he's doing great by suggesting that seven times be sufficient for pardoning a brother or sister who's sinned against him. Jesus tells him that his whole approach is wrong, totally devoid of the spirit of divine mercy and grace. Forgiveness isn't a commodity that can be measured or calculated. Peter's question is like asking: "How often must I show love to my wife or child?" Our Lord's reply blasts away all limits to forgiveness. Peter asked about the quantity of forgiveness, but Jesus is concerned about its quality. Seventy times seven, that is four hundred and ninety times, is symbolic of forgiving others as often as God has forgiven us. Love knows no limits. It thrives on forgiving and forgetting.

It was only many years after Margie Bowers was stabbed to death, that her brother Tom recovered from the deep wound her murder inflicted on his spirit. Tom was driving home from a business trip listening to a tape of St. Matthew's Gospel containing today's text. The son of Lutheran missionaries, Tom had been preparing to take a Bible study on

forgiveness. He heard a voice tell him, “So you’re going to tell a story of forgiveness? Are you going to forgive your sister’s murderer?” Margie’s murderer had been found quickly and sentenced to life in prison. The lives of her family were shattered. “At the time of the trial, I thought of the murderer as inhumane, as a monster” Tom reported. His pastor prayed for the murderer, but the thought never entered Tom’s head. Instead, he thought of killing the murderer, before that night, when he heard the same words of our Lord that we hear today. Forgiving Margie’s murderer had never occurred to him. He shared this with his Bible study group. Joined by the group, Tom knelt at the altar and forgave Margie’s murderer. Anger that Tom wasn’t even aware of left him, and he felt a real sense of peace. He now understood what God’s forgiveness of us leads us to do. God’s barrier-breaking, future-opening gift of forgiveness can even be granted to someone who doesn’t seek it.

The parable Jesus gives us is an incredible story. It’s meant to be! Its conclusion is as absurd as human refusal to forgive and forget. This is no way to reduce a nation’s deficit—by going around and forgiving a corrupt official of a billion dollar debt. But that’s what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. In today’s parable, the King first of all seeks justice. But when the debtor pleads for patience to repay the debt, he changes his mind. Aware that the debtor will never be able to repay the debt, the King gives more than he’s asked for. He doesn’t merely postpone repayment or reduce the debt—he cancels it!

The King’s cancellation of such a huge debt portrays God’s amazing forgiveness of us. The longer we live, the more wonderful God’s repeated forgiveness becomes. “For forgiveness of sins is greater than all sins; it goes far beyond all sin, and is mightier and stronger than all sin (Luther).” The Bible uses lavish terms to express the magnitude of forgiveness. To “forgive” is to “send packing”, to “hurl away”, to “cast into the depths of the sea”. “Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18-19).” Forgiveness is the greatest and noblest expression of God’s love for us sinners. Forgiveness is God’s inconceivable grace in action, which contradicts human ideas of fairness and justice, so that we

can only respond in awe and amazement to the One who is so good to us.

Forgiveness is the heart of the Gospel. It bulldozes down the walls we build that keep us at a distance from each other, and enters the backyard of our hearts to flood them with mercy and forgiveness for others. The divine forgiveness Christ Jesus made so real and tangible for us doesn't deny past injury. But it refuses to let past injury stand in the way of a new start for us. Forgiveness is a stream of grace in which we can swim and bathe. The gap between what we are and what we ought to be is now filled by our Lord's creative and transforming pardon of us. What really matters now is the future made possible through forgiveness. Forgiveness unseals the springs of love. It is the most regenerating force on earth.

When we are freed by forgiveness, we learn to forgive freely; when we forgive each other, we're free forever from the past. Sadly, in today's text, the King's generosity to his corrupt official, hasn't made the slightest impact on the official. The story takes an unexpected turn. This forgiven servant meets a fellow servant who owes him a tiny debt and he treats him shamefully. His words *"Pay what you owe!"* ring so grotesquely in our ears. In the light of what had happened earlier, this loveless demand sounds so shocking, so scandalous. The King's kindness is insulted and his merciful example is treated with inconceivable contempt. Other servants are shocked at such scandalous failure to forgive, so they tell their king what has happened. The King summons him in and says, *"You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me; should not you have had mercy on your fellow-servant as I had mercy on you (v.32-33)?"* The King's words are stated in the form of a question so that the guilty debtor must reply personally, and with him, all those who hear Christ's parable. We've all been forgiven far more by Christ Jesus than we'll ever have to forgive others. *"Forgive each other just as Christ has forgiven you (Colossians 3:13)."*

Those who cannot forgive others break the bridge over which they themselves must pass. When you fail to forgive someone who has hurt or offended you, you put yourself in an emotional prison. You pay dearly for the luxury of carrying a grudge. Is it worth it? Forgiving the other person releases you from the punishment of a self-made prison in which

you're both the jailer and the inmate. Before Jesus Christ came, the Jews said it was the duty of the offender to seek pardon of the injured party. But Jesus says that the injured party is to take the initiative in offering forgiveness.

In everyday language, a "Christian spirit" is associated with a "forgiving spirit". Corrie ten Boom met again a guard who had been her captor during World War II. After she spoke at a church gathering, he came forward and asked her for her forgiveness. She hesitated briefly, recalling how cruel he had been to her, her sister and many others. Then, remembering Christ's teaching, but still feeling unable to give him her hand, she prayed silently: "Jesus, help me! ... I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And suddenly, she says, she could feel God's power coursing through her hand and out to the former guard. "I forgive you, brother", she cried, with all her heart. She reported later that she'd never known God's love so powerfully as she did then.

Discover with Corrie ten Boom that God's forgiveness is such an amazing gift we are compelled share it with others. "*Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven*" – and extend that good cheer to others. "Stop being bitter and angry and mad at others. Don't yell at one another or curse each other or ever be rude. Instead, be kind and merciful, and forgive others, just as God forgave you because of Christ (Ephesians 4:31-32)."

Amen.