

“Forgiven To Forgive”

Matthew 18:21-35

September 13, 2020

As of Friday, the state of North Carolina had 182,286 confirmed cases of Covid-19, 156,000 people have recovered from the infection; 928 people were hospitalized; and 6.3% of Covid tests were positive at the end of the first week of Phase 2.5. In California, the massive complex of wildfires has scorched more than 471,185 acres and forced some 20,000 people from their homes. Yesterday our nation remembered how terrorist attacks killed almost 3000 people in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC exactly 19 years ago. We live in a world that is fascinated by numbers and calculations. I’m sure there are news reporters in California, Oregon, and Washington who are reporting statistics throughout the day of what area in their state has the greatest chance of burning, what time the fires will hit different areas, and the estimated costs of the damages to businesses, homes, and property.

It’s an election year, so we will read or hear statistics about how many men are supporting a candidate, how many working moms are supporting another candidate, how many people are happy with the economy, and how many people will be voting by mail. It is also a year for the census to be taken, so we will even be counting each other. Counting intrigues us. We count how many people we allow into the sanctuary for worship and we count how many views we get of our worship services online.

Now there’s nothing wrong with doing all of this counting, but sometimes counting can interfere with who we are called to be as God’s people. Peter, in our Gospel lesson for today, goes through something like this as he asks Jesus, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as 7 times? Peter understands that Jesus wants us to forgive those who sin against us, but he assumes there must be a limit to forgiving when he suggests forgiving someone up to 7 times. In other words, Peter wants to count something that’s better left uncounted. Like many things in life, when we start keeping track, we may lose some of the genuine sincerity. We can begin to think that forgiveness is something that belongs to us, that we can own it and give it out when we feel it’s the right thing to do. When in reality forgiveness is a gift to us from God. So when Jesus tells Peter he should forgive 77 times (or 70 times 7 as some translations put it), He means stop counting and let my forgiveness flow freely from Me through you to others. Now that’s not easy. It is very difficult to forgive someone who has hurt you deeply. When this happens we are tempted to respond with avoidance, hate, or revenge.

So Jesus explains this concept with a parable about a man who owes a huge debt to a king, 10,000 talents. We don’t know exactly how much money that is, but the number is supposed to represent a figure so great that it would be impossible for anyone to repay it in their lifetime. The king is not a tyrant, but a fair judge. The man owes him money and has a responsibility to pay it back. But this king is also a generous king, who’s willing to cancel the debt and take a loss. In other words, the king freely forgives.

Shockingly, then this man who had this tremendous debt forgiven is unwilling to do the same to a man who owes him a much smaller debt – like \$2. This ungrateful man would not forgive as he had been forgiven, and as a result he loses out on the gift of eternal life in heaven with God.

The point that Jesus is making is that if you want to start keeping records on forgiveness, you will never get out of debt. If books were kept, we would find that the debt we’ve been forgiven by God is insurmountable. What we have to forgive each other cannot compare to what God has forgiven us. Revenge, keeping score, or putting conditions on forgiveness, such as “She better ask me sincerely” or “He better make it up to me” is the world’s response to sin, but it is not God’s response. God holds no conditions on forgiveness. He freely forgives us, including the many times when we don’t even ask for forgiveness or remember all of our sins. Therefore, since God has surrendered His right to hold our sins against us through Jesus’ perfect life and death on the cross, He wants us to do the same to others. After all, forgiveness is the basis of our life together. Without it, we couldn’t function as a church, as families, or as a society. Forgiveness changes us as individuals and as a community, because we learn by forgiving and being forgiven, to live with others.

When we were in kindergarten, we could easily “forgive and move on,” but not as adults. Forgiveness becomes much more difficult the more adult-ish we become. Maybe that’s why Jesus said (in our baptism liturgy today), “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to

such as these.” And “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

I know it's difficult at times to forgive, but the amazing thing about Jesus is that He forgives us even for the times we don't perfectly forgive others. His gift of forgiveness gives us a remarkable strength to forgive others, and we see that today in our Old Testament lesson. The text of Genesis 50 is actually the end of a very long story about Joseph and how he forgave his 10 older brothers. You may have learned this story growing up. Joseph was loved by his father, Jacob, who gave him a very colorful coat. But his brothers were jealous, so they grabbed Joseph one day, took his coat, and sold him as a slave. He was taken to Egypt and sold to Pharaoh's bodyguard. The 10 brothers then covered up their malicious act by dipping Joseph's coat into goat's blood and bringing it to their dad to identify it. Jacob imagined that Joseph had been eaten by wild beasts, and he grieved inconsolably for his son.

For over 20 years those 10 brothers lived in guilt about what they had done to Joseph and their father. Every time they saw their father grieve for Joseph, they knew they were to blame. Meanwhile, Joseph suffered for many years, but God was always with him. God gave Joseph the ability to interpret the Pharaoh's dreams and eventually he earned the Pharaoh's trust, thus becoming one of his top assistants. One day the brothers went to buy grain in Egypt and they found Joseph, who recognized them, but they didn't recognize him. Joseph revealed himself to his brothers and they then went and got their father. Joseph and Jacob were reunited and the family lived together for 17 years before Jacob died.

Our Old Testament lesson begins at this point. Now that their father had died the 10 brothers thought, “Joseph must hate us. Surely he will seek revenge for what we did to him.” They didn't worry about Joseph hurting them while their dad was alive, but now that he was dead they feared what Joseph would do to them. But Joseph, through the gift of God's forgiveness, had forgiven his brothers a long time ago. He wasn't seeking revenge. It appears, though, that Joseph and his brothers never had a serious conversation talk about the past during their 17 years they lived together in Egypt.

Sometimes, instead of talking in our families or with people at work or in our relationships with others, we have this idea that past hurts and sins will just go away if we don't ever bring them up again. As a result, no one is healed and people live with broken relationships because they are unwilling to try and work through them or they are afraid to take the risk of opening themselves up. Instead of genuinely forgiving others, we sometimes just say, “That's ok, don't worry about it;” but that doesn't actually heal the hurt or the relationship. Real confession and forgiveness needs to take place. So Joseph explains to his brothers at the end of the story that God had a purpose in allowing evil things to happen to him, namely that he would be able to save them and many others from an upcoming famine through his position with Pharaoh.

Those who hated and killed Jesus meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, so that all people could be forgiven and saved. For Jesus, forgiveness was a matter of life and death, but for us forgiveness is simply a matter of faith, that should be given and received often, whenever requested, and wherever needed, freely and unconditionally.