

SERMON

Year A – Pentecost 16 – Sunday, Sept. 17, 2023

The Rev. Carolyn Bradley, Dcn

I would never say to someone ‘You must forgive.’ I would not dare. However much we have been wronged, however justified our hatred, if we cherish it, it will poison us. We must pray for the power to forgive, for it is in forgiving that we are healed,

Sheila Cassidy, MD British hospice physician. Human rights activist and a torture survivor from the Pinochet regime in Chile.

In today’s Gospel we hear a parable about mercy and forgiveness. In it we hear Jesus tell Peter that forgiveness is something given as many times as needed...”seventy-seven times.” But what is the point that Jesus is trying to make here by giving such an odd number? Why does Peter even need an exact number? Jesus’ response may seem to be an absurd exaggeration but I think the point is that we forgive always; we forgive without keeping track.

We often hear it is best “to forgive and forget” as a means of resolving strife and conflict...except in Irish families. Keeping track of all the grievances and grudges is almost an art form in some Irish American families. And the litany of offenses are usually recalled at wakes and funerals where emotions are most often running high and fueled by some nips before, after and sometimes during the rituals.

I am aware that this behavior also occurs in other cultures. So perhaps Peter’s request for clarification is not without cause. But Jesus’ message is quite clear...keeping track is not really forgiveness at all. You may appear kind and gracious, but if you are running that ledger of offenses in your head or “putting it in the book” as I heard some older Irish relatives remark, it suggests that a line has been drawn that can’t be crossed. Regardless of how generously drawn

that imaginary line may be, if beyond the line the chance of forgiveness is abandoned, it is not forgiveness. Jesus makes the point that forgiveness is always the goal.

In today's parable, although the characters may seem exaggerated, Lutheran seminary professor Stanley Saunders suggests in his commentary on this text, they would be familiar to the people of the ancient Mediterranean region. Kings employed agents such as the "unmerciful" servant to organize the systems that brought wealth to him. This servant appears to be what we would term today as "upper" management. The servant had access and control of vast amounts of the king's wealth. Saunders further explains the debt may have been a "loan" that the servant skimmed from the steady flow he was responsible for directing to the king's coffers. The Mediterranean economy operated at this time by sending an acceptable flow of wealth up the pyramid while retaining as much as possible to get away with for oneself.

In hearing this parable, we can speculate who the King and the servant represent. But while this parable may seem fairly clear and easy to comprehend, the point of all parables is critical reflection and to help us consider another point of view. This parable clearly tells us to forgive as we have been forgiven. If we link the message of this parable with the Lord's Prayer which appears earlier in Matthew's Gospel, we hear how forgiveness is relational and reciprocal in nature. We ought to forgive as God has forgiven us. Forgiveness- the giving and the receiving of it- is reciprocal. You can't experience forgiveness without doing it. In today's Gospel selection, Jesus teaches Peter and us that God's mercy and forgiveness surpasses what we truly deserve and our comprehension of it. As we have been forgiven, we must therefore forgive those who have wronged us.

Our world today certainly needs mercy and forgiveness. The question for us becomes how to truly learn these concepts and put them into practice in our “modern” capitalistic society which values competition and confrontation over cooperation and respectful dialogue. Mercy and forgiveness are not values that support or promote the pursuit of power and privilege. It means renouncing the values of envy, hatred, violence and retribution that seem to fuel the capitalist drive for acquisition regardless of the cost to people and the environment. Our “modern” society has created intractable systems not much different from the economic systems of ancient Rome which ensured the continuous flow of wealth, power, and honor from the workers at the bottom to those at the top of the pyramid. One of the questions we must consider from today’s text is what type of system do we wish to live and work in today?

If we would prefer to try to develop a different economic system, it requires us to live by a different set of values. Humility becomes necessary if we are to act with mercy and be forgiving to all. Humility, honesty and responsibility are core values in 12 Step programs. And it was through participation in the fellowship of Alanon that I learned the most about mercy and forgiveness.

When I first started attending Alanon as a young woman in my 20s, I thought I knew quite a bit about religion and God. After all I had been educated for 19 years in Catholic schools, colleges and in a Jesuit University. Religion was an academic subject for the first 12 years of my education. And I got all As in the subject!

However, 12 Step meetings have nothing to do with organized religion. The Program is a spiritual fellowship that takes you on a journey to form a personal relationship with the God of your understanding. So sitting in Alanon meetings, I came to know a very different God than the

God of the Baltimore catechism. I came to know...a God of mercy and love. A God who was willing to forgive...again and again and again. A God who loved me in my imperfection! That was a new experience. Unconditional love! I thought you only received that from your dog.

In today's Gospel we hear a parable about mercy and forgiveness. In it we hear Jesus tell Peter that forgiveness is something given as many times as needed..."seventy-seven times." In Alanon, I learned the process of forgiveness really starts with forgiving yourself, which then frees you up to forgive others. I was always willing to forgive and move on when it came to dealing with others but tended to be a very harsh critic with myself. It was suggested to me that having a higher standard for myself than for others could be considered arrogance, not kindness. That took some time to process and understand!

When I came into The Rooms, my sponsor suggested a book for me to read entitled "The Spirituality of Imperfection." That book started me on the path to understand what forgiveness was really about and why it was essential for recovery. Being assured of God's mercy and forgiveness is essential if we are to complete a daily personal inventory and promptly admit when we are wrong. Being wrong is no longer a source of shame but an opportunity for grace. "We are forgiven only if we are open to forgiving, but we are able to forgive only in being forgiven- we get only by giving and we give only by getting." (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992). *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, pg.222.

Forgiveness of self and others is learned through a daily process in which we try to be kind, generous and loving to all we encounter. Humility, acceptance, willingness and gratitude become qualities sought to attain and retain.

Perfection is not expected, but acknowledging our mistakes, promptly admitting them and asking forgiveness when necessary is. By practicing self-forgiveness, it is easier to forgive others. By not comparing and developing resentments, listening and identifying with other's struggles becomes a daily routine. Growth and change is attained with the help of others and sharing experience, hope and strength helps others to do likewise. Forgive, forget, and move on. Let go and let God!

AMEN!