

Forgiveness
Matthew 18:21-22
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7/14/13

One of Ernest Hemingway's famous short stories begins like this: Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana Noon Tuesday; all is forgiven, Papa. A squadron of police had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.

Hemingway's joke is about how common the name Paco is, but the more poignant message is, there are a lot of hurting people out there. Certainly every one of us has had moments in life where a relationship was fractured because of a misplaced word or careless act. This morning, God's Word will show us that this is part of the condition in which we find ourselves, but it doesn't ever have to be the last word. Maybe we've got some things to learn or re-learn about forgiveness.

For the last few weeks, we've been looking together at the attributes of a life lived in the Kingdom of God. And as we've discovered, it is only through the work of the Holy Spirit that we are drawn into the power and the possibility of a life with Jesus. But still, one of the hardest parts about living a *with-God* life is forgiveness. In our passage, Jesus addresses this with some brass tacks instruction, but it's going to take a little more digging and a little more consideration for us to see where Jesus is coming from.

So I invite you to turn with me to Matthew's gospel, chapter 18, verses 21 and 22. You can follow along in your pew bible or on the screens beside me. Again Matthew 18:21-22. Listen carefully; we're reading God's Holy Word.

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. May the same Holy Spirit that inspired the writing and preservation of these words inspire them in our reading and hearing, as well. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

Jesus and his disciples are traveling throughout Galilee and Judea, and here they find themselves in the town of Capernaum on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. Here in a quiet few moments he has with his disciples, Jesus is going to take care of some family business. He responds to a question by one of the disciples who asked which of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven: *Which of us is the best disciple, and what are we going to get in return?* Being with Jesus was not enough, they needed to form rank.

Anyone ever have a sibling tattle on you? It never really had anything to do with what you did; subconsciously it was always about establishing rank with your parents. When I was little, I remember my little brother telling on me for something I'd done. The infraction earned me a spanking. But what I remember like it was yesterday was him standing where dad couldn't see him, but I could. And as I was having my rear end tanned, there he stood snickering and savoring the moment because for that moment he had the upper hand.

In a sense, this is what the disciples do. They ask Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of God, half expecting him to say, duh...you are, for reasons x, y, and z.

But this isn't what Jesus does. Instead of calling the disciples out and making an example of them on how not to live, Jesus wants to restore. In fact, it says in a few verses prior to Mathew 18 that Jesus is more concerned with the safety of one wayward lamb than he is with the rights of the 99 others. For Jesus, restoration is something that takes place on an individual basis. So much so that Jesus gives specific instruction to the church on how to restore one who has fallen into sin. You approach the person one on one. Rarely does Jesus ever confront people—aside from the religious leaders—out in the open. But if the person won't listen, take a few from the community in an effort to restore the relationship.

Then we come to our text today where Peter is looking for policy he can hold to on how many times he should forgive. "Seven times, Lord?" Seven is the number of perfection. Throughout the Bible, God uses numbers not just as an indicator of time or quantity, but to teach a lesson. Jesus responds to Peter, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Forgiveness, Jesus implies, is not so much about settling the score, as it is about ongoing restoration. It's something we do on a case-by-case basis, but is enabled by a deep trust that God is in control.

But why would I want to forgive? After all, isn't forgiveness just admitting the other person got the best of me, or took advantage me, and then letting them off the hook? Isn't forgiveness the easy way out?

No, forgiveness is a choice we make; it's a choice on how we will choose to see another person.

The first thing forgiveness does is recognize that a person is not the sum of their actions. In a sense, just because a person has injured us does not mean that injury and hurt is all this person is capable of. In forgiveness, what God is inviting us to do is see that the person on the other end, just like us, is a whole mixed bag of experiences and emotions, hurts and heartaches. That in the same way you and I are made in the image of God and fall short of living that out on a daily basis, so too the other person is also made in the image of God and lives imperfectly as such.

Our Old Testament reading this morning is one of the most beautiful and profound passages in the entire Bible. Jacob and Esau are going to meet. Esau, the older brother who has been hoodwinked, hornswaggled, and had the wool pulled over his eyes at every turn in the road by his rascal of a younger brother, Jacob. And Esau has every right to get even. But as we read in Genesis 33:4, Esau runs toward Jacob, and instead of retaliating, he embraces him and weeps with him. Jacob was ready to sell the farm to earn favor with his brother. But Esau was prepared to offer forgiveness. In his younger brother, Esau sees not the sum of all his actions, but a child of God, broken and sinful just like the rest of us, and he chooses to forgive. And then we hear Jacob's response and it is one of the most captivating verses in all scripture. Jacob says, "Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor."

Forgiveness is the choice we make to see the other person not simply as the sum of their actions. The late Lewis Smedes, Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, puts it this way: he says that when we forgive, we begin to rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us.

A number of years ago on a summer evening, Misty Wallace was out with her friends in downtown Indianapolis. She was in a fast food parking lot making a phone call in a pay phone when a voice behind her asked if she was done using the phone. And as she turned around to see where the voice was coming from, she was shot in the face by an 18 year-old-man named Keith Blackburn. Immediately, she crumbled to the ground and ended up lying, bleeding with her head under the front tire of her vehicle. Keith, a young man who was strung out and on a crime spree, was looking for a get away car. And after getting in and turning the key, he realized the car would not start.

Eventually, Keith was apprehended and sentenced to 25 years in prison. Misty, on the other hand, had to learn to live with the feelings over what had been done to her. Then one day, nearly 20 years after the incident, Misty Googled the name of her shooter only to find a picture of Keith. But not just any picture, it was a picture of him standing with the Governor's wife and Miss America receiving an award. It turns out that while he was incarcerated, Keith had something of a transformation. He became a follower of Jesus, completed his college degree, and had begun ministering to other inmates through a prison fellowship Bible study. He had also repeatedly tried to send letters to Misty, none of which were received by her. Now, after his release, he was studying at Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan and about to be ordained as a prison chaplain.

But there was still one thing missing: Misty had never confronted, or gotten an explanation, let alone apology from her shooter. And now that he was free, instead of stewing in her hatred toward him, she chose to do something radical. She contacted him through Facebook and asked to meet him. "I want to begin the process of forgiving you." And thus began a deliberate and heart wrenching process of forgiveness because, as Misty said, "I knew that there was more to him than that scared boy who made one very costly mistake."

Misty, a follower of Jesus as well, believed as the Bible teaches that none of us is defined by our bad choices, but that each of us is a beloved child of God first, and someone who still struggles with the problem of sin second. Her choice highlights that the only way a person can ever truly heal is through forgiveness, and that true forgiveness can only be seen through the lens of the cross.

So often our culture tells us that forgiveness is the weak, passive acceptance of people who inflict pain upon us, that forgiveness is letting the bad guys off easily. But in reality, it's just the opposite. We believe forgiveness is an active decision of the will to choose restoration over separation.

The only way we can begin to see others through God's eyes is to realize that it was while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us. Forgiveness is not passive resignation. Forgiveness is the costliest gift ever given. Jesus offered his life for ours, for the breach in our relationship with God. Not because he was weak and resigned, but because he was strong. It was because of God's unrelenting desire to restore relationship between us and God that Jesus willingly accepted the burden of the cross. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:5, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

When we truly live in the Kingdom of God as forgiven and forgiving people, we realize that Jesus is inviting us to so much more than simply monitoring a balance sheet. The cross and resurrection tell us once and for all, "You are forgiven, and you can either live in the curse of Good Friday or the promise of Easter Sunday."

Forgiveness is not just overlooking past failures; it's healing to the core and an initiation to a new way of life. A way of life that is filled with grace and gratitude, a way of life that is given immense power by the Holy Spirit, a way of life that is intimately connected to the heart of Jesus. You have the opportunity to live into that healing and wholeness and God-breathed purpose if you will simply allow yourself to offer and receive God's forgiveness.

In John chapter 5, Jesus is talking to a lame man who lives near the great healing pool of Bethesda, and he asks him the question that we all need to answer as well for ourselves: "Do you want to be made well?" Are you hanging on to that seed of resentment and anger over a person who has hurt you? Holding it like a little blanket of security? Do you tell yourself that what they did to you is the unforgivable sin? Or on the other side, are you holding on to the shame of something you said or did, because you think that its weight is too heavy?

To these, Jesus calmly and matter-of-factly asks, "Do you...want...to be made well?"

"But master, there's no one to help me. But master, I was humiliated. But master, I was insulted. But master, I was excluded."

And to that Jesus asks you again, "Do you want to be made well?"

This morning, it is possible that while I have been speaking, the name or face of someone who has hurt you or someone whom you have hurt came to mind. I'm going to ask Rick to come and play right now. In these moments, ask Jesus to show you how to be made well. To live completely free from guilt and resentment.

Paul says that God was in Christ reconciling us to himself and he offers to us the ministry of reconciliation. I invite you to simply close your eyes and consider the awesome gift of forgiveness in Jesus Christ and consider how you might live more fully into heart of Jesus Christ the savior.