

Pentecost 13, 2011

The Foolishness of Forgiveness

Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

“Joseph wept when [his brothers] spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, ‘We are here as your slaves.’ But Joseph said to them, *‘Don’t be afraid!* Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. *So have no fear,* I myself will provide for you and your little ones.’ In this way he reassured them, *speaking kindly to them.*”

Here, in the fiftieth and final chapter of the Book of Genesis, a book that speaks time and again of human sinfulness and divine forgiveness, and here at the

conclusion of this masterful story of Joseph and his brothers, we hear that God had a greater purpose for Israel beyond the savage crimes that Joseph had suffered at the hands of his jealous brothers.

Fearing the retribution of the now powerful Joseph in Egypt, the brothers fear, “What if [he] still *bears a grudge* against us and *pays us back in full* for all the wrong that we did to him?”

But, in one tender, tear-filled moment of mercy, the *brother* Joseph speaks words of absolution: “*Don't be afraid*. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.”

Good for Egypt in years of famine.

Good for Israel in years of growth as a people.

And, at least four times, Joseph reassures his fearful brothers that “it was not you who sent me to Egypt, but God.”

“And Joseph spoke kindly to them.”

Of course, it is a story of forgiveness beyond human forgiving.

“Am I in the place of God?” Joseph asks.

Likewise, Paul asks the house churches at Rome, “Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we’ll all stand before the judgement seat of God. . . So then, each of us will be accountable to God [not one another].”

And today, Jesus tells this outlandish story about an “unmerciful servant” who received forgiveness for his own

massive debt, but then, instead of extending forgiveness for a puny debt of a thousand bucks that he was owed by another servant, threw this debtor in jail until he could pay up.

We remember today that there are *some dates* on the calendar that we cannot forget.

We remember today that there are *some debts* that we cannot forgive.

Sunday, December 7th, 1941.

Friday, November 22nd, 1963.

Thursday, April 4th, 1968

Tuesday, September 11th, 2001.

Wednesday, June 29th, 2005.

There are those *extraordinary dates* that we can never

forget:

The bombing of Pearl Harbor.

The assassination of President Kennedy and Dr.

Martin Luther King.

There are *extraordinary debts* that we may never

forgive:

Terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

The senseless death of a beloved pastor and his
daughter.

And even though Peters' question today is asked of
the church, "If another member of *the church*, [a brother or
sister], sins against me," we might also ask his question:
"Lord, how often should we forgive? . . . Lord, do you really
mean for us to forgive heinous crimes against humanity?"

Or are you only speaking to the church?”

“Lord, how much should we forgive? . . .”

“[Well], not seven times,” Jesus answers Peter, “but, I tell you, seventy times seven.” (The manuscripts differ on whether it is “seventy-seven” or “seventy times seven”; either way, it’s a whole lot of forgiveness.)

Note that Peter is very generous with forgiveness:

“Seven times . . .”

According to the rabbis of Jesus’ day, a person should not be nearly so generous in canceling debts.

To cancel a debt once is very generous, as some of you may know.

To be let down by the same person and to cancel a debt twice would be considered exemplary.

But to be fool enough to get hurt by the same person a third time, and to let go of a debt even then, would be way over the top.

But Peter knows by now that Jesus is often way over the top.

So, he makes a bold move: “Forgive as many as seven times . . .”

Seven, of course, is a holy number (seven days of the week, seven pairs of animals for the ark, seven loaves and a few small fish, seven churches of Asia Minor).

Maybe Peter thinks that seven would have the kind of “over the top” quality that Jesus is looking for.

Remember: “Go the second mile . . . If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone

who takes away your coat don't withhold even your shirt."

If someone offends me, disrespects me, trips me up, gets me fired, or just cheats, lies, gossips and makes life miserable for me, well then, "Maybe Jesus would want me to forgive that person as many as seven times."

So, Peter does the multiplication: "*Oh, Lord*, that's almost 500 times!"

I'm thinking of a cartoon about the prodigal son.

The father is going down the road to meet his boy and the caption reads: "I sure will be glad when that boy finally grows up; this is *the sixth fatted calf* I've had to kill."

But, of course, this conversation is not about doing the multiplication.

And it has nothing to do with keeping score.

And Jesus is not interested, never has been interested, never will be interested in numbers, numbers of any kind which seem to define everything about us, even in the church.

No, Peter, forgiveness is not about numbers.

Forgiveness is about an attitude, a way of life, a condition of the heart.

And, by the way, if you're keeping track of all the debts you've canceled, then it's not really forgiveness at all.

If you need to count, then you're still hanging on to those debts, prepared to foreclose at the most useful time for you against the person who owes you some teensy, little debt.

If your counting, then nothing is really forgiven, no debts canceled, no grudges dissolved. And you're still looking down your nose at somebody.

So, Jesus asks us to compare God's *royal rule* with a king who was ready to balance the books with his slaves.

One slave owed his king ten thousand talents.

And just to give you an idea of how much money this is, some say it would be comparable in today's currency to something like *two billion bucks*.

Now, how's anyone ever going repay that debt?

You expect the king to be outraged, flabbergasted.

But no, "*out of compassion* (pity) for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave the debt."

In one lavish, extravagant act, the king gives back the

slave's entire life, the two billion dollar debt is canceled, and apparently this slave, his wife and family are free to go.

Following the cross is foolishness, says Paul, “[For] those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

And, if we don't realize what a huge debt has been canceled for us on Jesus' cross, then I don't suppose we are really interested in following the foolish way of Jesus' cross and forgiveness.

Most of us aren't even interested in forgetting about (i.e., letting go of) a few bucks, which probably says a whole lot about our inability to let go of anything, our grip

held firmly to everything we call “mine,” which is really not one thing.

Nothing is “mine” when you think about it.

Everything, everything is “on loan” to us in a life that fades like a summer flower.

“Beggars all are we,” Luther confessed on his deathbed.

But we think we’ve earned everything.

We have earned nothing.

Everything is “for-given,” all a gift “beforehand.”

We owe everything to the King.

But what is even more unbelievable in the story is that this servant, who has had his entire life returned to him, remains *stubbornly unchanged* by the incredible gift he has

been given.

His heart remains as stone; not of flesh but stone.

He runs into a fellow servant who owes him no more than maybe a few thousand bucks. But instead of telling this other servant to “forget it,” this first servant grabs him by the neck, and says, “Pay up, or die!”

And we remember Jesus said it: “. . . to whom much is given, much will be expected.”

Jesus asks the question yet another way: “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or, how can you say to your sister, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is a log in your own eye? *You hypocrite*, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see

clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.”

Of course, forgiveness doesn't mean putting up with an abusive spouse without insisting upon change.

Forgiveness doesn't mean lying down and being a doormat for someone else to trample.

Forgiveness doesn't mean always surrendering to someone else's will.

And forgiveness certainly does not mean that we fail to defend the defenseless and protect the vulnerable by not doing all we can do to restrain evil.

And yet, the king rightly expects that the forgiven slave, who has been given an incredible gift, will behave differently than he behaves.

And the king is rightfully angry when the slave doesn't

behave that way, when the slave refuses to forgive another slave his little debt.

The message is clear: We have been forgiven much; we ought not withhold forgiveness from others, especially in the community of brothers and sisters.

We ought not to allow others' behavior to determine our own behavior.

“Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.”

“In this way [Joseph] reassured them, *speaking kindly to [his brothers].*”

“Be merciful,” says Jesus, “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.”

“Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors,” we pray.

“Accept one another, just as God has accepted you.”

You see, God’s ways are to relieve debt, to lift the yoke from the burdened animal, and to set free the captive.

In the documentary film, *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*, Eva Kor tells her remarkable story about the ten months she spent with her twin sister in Auschwitz, a story of forgiveness that has outraged many.

Mengele was known as the “angel of death.”

Along with many other twins, Eva and her sister Miriam were separated from their families and subjected to Mengele’s horrific “medical” experiments.

After liberation by the Soviets when she was ten years

old, and then after ten years in Israel, Eva moved to Terre Haute, Indiana in 1960 and raised her family.

She returned to Auschwitz for the first time in 1995 for the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the death camps.

And on that occasion she did the unthinkable.

Eva Kor read aloud her personal “official declaration of amnesty” to Mengele and the Nazis.

To be liberated from the Nazis was not enough, she said; she needed to be released from the pain of the past.

To extend forgiveness without [anything] required of the perpetrators, Eva wrote, was an “act of self-healing.”

Through the act of “forgiving your worst enemy” Eva said that she experienced “the feeling of complete freedom from pain.”

“I hope for healing and truth, not hatred and vengeance.”

Just days after the murder of her husband, Ivon, and daughter, Sarah, Pastor Nancy Eileen Harris wrote, “I hope for healing and truth, not hatred and vengeance.

“God extends to all the promise of forgiveness, healing and hope through God’s loving nature and triumphant mercy.

“We are blessed to be part of God’s work, and I know that God is working great good in the midst of tragic loss . . . God’s great goodness is always overcoming evil when we place ourselves in his will and presence.”