

## Forgiveness

I have a good friend from St. Ambrose who retired and moved to Vermont to live in a house his father-in-law built. He taught nineteenth-century English and seems to embrace that time. He never had a TV and does not like email. The two of us now correspond by writing letters back and forth. He uses either a pencil or an old typewriter and fills up every inch of the paper. We have a strict, unwritten rule: I will not get a letter from him unless I first send a reply to his last one. Recently I wrote that had forgotten whose turn it was, and got a reply that made it quite clear it was mine. He was keeping track and I was properly chastened.

Last Sunday Jesus talked with his disciples about forgiveness and reconciliation. If someone has wronged you, he said, talk to that person directly and alone. If that doesn't work, take two or three with you, and if you have to, tell it to the whole church. Only then should the person be considered an outsider, "a Gentile and a tax collector." The point was to make every effort at reconciliation.

Peter got the point but wanted to keep track and put a limit on it. Peter asked, should someone be forgiven as many as seven times? Did that question make Jesus roll his eyes? Did he sigh deeply? We'll never know, but we *do* know he said to Peter, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." In other words, don't keep count, Peter. Forgiveness isn't about keeping score.

Jesus then goes on to tell an extraordinary parable, so far out of our own cultural experience that it can invite a negative reaction. The parable boils down to this: a servant who owed his master a fabulous amount of money was forgiven that huge debt when he pleaded for mercy. But instead of being changed by that experience, he punished a fellow servant for a paltry debt. The master found out and in turn punished the one he previously forgave – not because of what was owed, but because of his refusal to forgive. Jesus underlined his message when he said to "forgive your brother or sister *from your heart*." Forgiveness is not just lip service; it has to come from the heart.

We hear that same lesson every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. We forgive because God forgave us first. You may have heard someone at Trinity who emphasizes that point every time he prays the Lord's Prayer by saying "forgive us our trespasses **AS** we forgive those who trespass against us."

Paul's letter to the Romans reinforces that idea. Don't go looking for arguments, Paul says. If you don't judge or despise someone, then you won't have to forgive them. More importantly, they won't have to forgive you. Let God be the judge. Keep *your* focus on honoring God. Keep your eyes fixed on Christ rather than looking to see what your neighbor is doing.

Jesus' parable reminds us of the enormous debt we owe to God. Each of us knows how much we have fallen short of who God calls us to be. And those are just the sins we are aware of! One form of confession in the prayer book asks God to forgive "our sins, known and unknown, things done and left undone." I like that "known and unknown" part. It sounds complete. The sense of sin can be so overwhelming that the same prayer asks God to "uphold us by your Spirit." The

good news of Jesus Christ is that all of those sins *are* forgiven by the grace of God, not by anything we do to deserve forgiveness.

Forgiveness requires a response, however. That's the point of the parable. The response is not only to give thanks to God, but to forgive others as God has forgiven us. Not seven times, as Peter would have it, but seventy-seven times. Compared to the many ways we offend God, another person's sins against us are pretty small. God forgives us every time we ask, whether in our own private prayers or in the corporate act of public confession. Can we do any less for others?

With my St. Ambrose friend I will try to keep better track of whose turn it is to write. But I hope I never keep track of whose turn it is to forgive. Forgiveness is not a matter of turns. It's a matter of grace. The grace comes from God, again and again, through Jesus Christ. As the prologue to John's Gospel says, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace...grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." May you experience that grace this week, that forgiveness of all you have done. Filled with that grace, may you also forgive as generously as God has forgiven you.

[Pentecost 15: Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35.]