



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 15 Proper 19 (A)

Forgiveness

[RCL]: Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114 or Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Have you ever heard this warning: Be careful what you pray for – you might get it. Watch out – you just might get what you are after. Here’s a prayer many of us pray at least once a week – *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*.

Is that what we really want? We know we want God’s forgiveness. Of that, we are quite sure. However, we are not so sure about the second part, about the way we forgive others. We know that we are not nearly so quick to forgive others as we hope and pray that God forgives us. The Psalmist says, “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.” Great news. We mess up. We ask God for forgiveness. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, and so God forgives us. But... when someone does us wrong, when someone does us dirty, we say, “not so fast.” We are *not* so full of compassion and mercy. We are *not* so slow to anger and of great kindness. We may be quick to anger and full of... colorful language.

And yet, this is how Our Lord taught us to pray – *forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*. Be careful what you pray for – you just might get it.

In our Gospel lesson, Peter comes to Jesus and asks, “Lord, if someone sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

Peter always asks the questions that we would like to ask. He is so earnest and so eager to do the right thing. But Peter also always seems to be getting it wrong. Maybe it’s this fallible humanity that makes Peter an exemplar for us. He had heard Jesus talk about forgiveness, so he wants to know more. And Peter must have done his homework, too. There is an ancient rabbinic tradition that says a person should forgive another who has sinned against him as many as four times. So, Peter, earnest and eager, tries to be even more extravagant than the rabbis, and he adds three more times. He asks, “Should I forgive a person even up to seven times?”

Seven times is a lot. It's three more than the rabbis. It is a lot of times to turn and forgive someone who has sinned against you. Perhaps Peter was expecting Jesus to praise him for even suggesting such extravagant forgiveness. Perhaps Peter was hoping for a pat on the back, a gold star for the day, for an A+ on his forgiveness exam.

This doesn't happen. Rather, Jesus turns and says, "No, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." New Testament scholars debate whether the Greek text means "seventy-seven times" or "seventy times seven times." But that is beside the point, because either way, Jesus is holding up an enormous number, a number so big that we can't begin to calculate it in terms of forgiveness. Peter wants a rule, a measurement, so he holds wide his hands and says, "This much, Lord? Should I forgive even this much?" And Jesus says, "No, much more than that. You're not even using the right scale. As far as the east is from the west, that's how much you should forgive." It's such an enormous amount of forgiveness, it would be senseless to try to calculate how much or how often.

There has been a fair amount of social science research on forgiveness of late. It turns out that forgiveness is good for you. People who forgive have lower levels of anger, anxiety, and depression, are more agreeable and emotionally stable, and may also have gained some health benefits. Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman in their book *Character Strengths and Virtues* list forgiveness as one of twenty-four character strengths that make for a good life and that contribute to human wellbeing. It's good to know that there is some social scientific evidence that supports the claim that forgiveness is good for us, even though I'm not too sure that was Jesus' point.

One instrument designed to assess our forgiving character is known as the "Forgiveness Likelihood Scale". It gives ten scenarios of wrongdoing and then asks participants to indicate their likelihood to forgive on a scale from very unlikely to very likely. Here are a few of the items:

1. You share something embarrassing about yourself to a friend who promises to keep the information confidential. However, the friend breaks his promise and proceeds to tell several people. What is the likelihood that you would choose to forgive your friend?
2. A family member humiliates you in front of others by sharing a story about you that you did not want anyone to know. What is the likelihood that you would choose to forgive the family member?
3. A stranger breaks into your house and steals a substantial sum of money from you. What is the likelihood that you would choose to forgive the stranger?

How are we doing so far?

It seems as though Peter comes to Jesus with his own version of a Forgiveness Likelihood Scale. Peter's question, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as

seven times?” is like asking, “How many times, on a scale from 0-7, must I forgive someone?” Jesus’ answer, as we have seen, is literally off the scale: “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Now, I take it that Jesus is not saying that Peter needs to recalibrate his Forgiveness Likelihood Scale. I really don’t think if Peter had asked, “How many times should I forgive, as many as 77 times?” that Jesus would have said, “Yes, 77, that seems about right.” Rather, I think Jesus’ response is a way of saying the question and what it is trying to measure is not quite right. The Psalmist says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us.” It’s hard to put a number on that type of forgiveness!

And, yet, many of us may still sympathize with Peter. It seems to us that following Jesus ought to make some difference in our lives. He tells us to forgive those who have sinned against us. He tells us to love our enemies. He says our righteousness ought to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. Okay. We want to follow and we are trying the best we can. But, perhaps like Peter, we would also like some benchmarks to know how we are doing. We may think Peter asking Jesus if he ought to forgive someone as many as seven times is a reasonable request for some practical guidelines. For most of us, sometime in our walk with the Lord, we have probably asked ourselves: Am I doing this right?

Unfortunately, that question may be part of the problem. The spiritual danger is that when we focus on our virtue and character strengths, we may become a bit too preoccupied with ourselves. And the real danger happens when we start thinking of our character strengths as accomplishments of our noble, virtuous, righteous selves. Here, we can too easily slide into self-righteousness, the smug attitude that knows what real forgiveness is, who is a truly forgiving person and who is not, who deserves forgiveness and who does not, and maybe even the extent and limits of forgiveness: “seven times seems about right.”

Here we can easily forget that, while our character strengths and virtues may indeed glorify God, when it comes to the Gospel, our Lord doesn’t just deal with parts of us, the noble bits that we would like to put on display, but rather God seeks a relationship with whole human beings, every thought, word, and deed, everything, absolutely everything, that we are and we do. And when we remember this, none of us, saints or sinners, people who are off the charts on the forgiveness scale and those of us who still struggle to forgive, have a leg to stand on. We are all utterly dependent on the unconditional, unmerited grace and mercy of Christ, who has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west.

Perhaps that’s why Jesus tells Peter the story about the unforgiving servant, a story where the numbers don’t add up, because the numbers can’t be added up, when it comes to what Jesus has done for us. In the story, a servant owes the king ten thousand talents. Now, this is a crazy number. A single talent was more than 15 years’ worth of daily wages. So, when Jesus says, this servant owed the king ten thousand talents, he’s effectively saying he owed him a bazillion dollars.

The servant, no surprise, couldn’t pay back the debt, so the king orders him and everything he has to be sold off. So, the servant falls on his knees and begs for an extension and promises that if he gets some extra time, he will pay everything back. And, we don’t know if we are to laugh at him or to pity him,

because there is no way the servant will ever be able to pay back the king. Maybe the king was amused, because he responds to this ridiculous request with an amazing act: Since there is no way the slave will ever be able to pay back what he owes, the king just forgives the debt, every last cent, and sets the slave free.

Yet, when the servant, who has just been forgiven a debt of a bazillion dollars, runs into a guy who owes him a hundred denarii – which amounts to a few bucks in comparison to what he owed the king – what does he do? Well, he grabs the guy by the throat and demands that he pay up. And when the king finds out that the servant for whom he had just forgiven an unimaginable amount wouldn't forgive the pittance that was owed him by another, he had the servant thrown into prison.

Jesus reframes the whole question about forgiveness. When it comes to forgiveness, we are all like servants who owe our Lord and King more than we can imagine. Try as we may to repay our debt through our character strengths or our virtues or our willingness to forgive as many as seven times, we will never be able to pay back all that we owe to God. But the good news is that despite our inability to ever give back to God everything we ought, God forgives us anyway, completely. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has taken upon Godself all our burdens and sins and debts and has forgiven them.

Completely, irrevocably, utterly forgiven and healed by Jesus. God is the God who forgives.

We forgive, then, because God forgives. The forgiveness that we are to pass on to others is the forgiveness we have in union with Christ. Not because we are moral heroes or because we seek our own wellbeing, but because we are forgiven sinners.

Forgiveness may very well be a character strength and virtue. It probably does contribute to leading good and happy lives. Saints like Peter probably do score more highly on Forgiveness Likelihood Scales. But, Jesus reminds us, when it comes to our ability and need to forgive, we are, all of us, those of us who have great character strengths and those of us who do not, penitents, debtors kneeling at the foot of the cross.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Be careful what you pray for – you just might get it.

The Rev. Joseph S. Pagano, Ph.D. is an Episcopal priest who currently serves as a priest in the Parish of Pasadena and Cormack in the Anglican Diocese of Western Newfoundland, Canada. He and his wife, the Rev. Amy Richter have a new book, Common Prayer: Reflections on Episcopal Worship (Cascade Books, 2019), available. It is a collection of personal essays by Episcopal laypeople and clergy, fiction and non-fiction writers, poets, musicians, and theologians reflecting on experiences of worship.