

MATTHEW 18:15-35

Forgiveness

The text this week is a mishmash of communal disciplinary guidelines, sayings of Jesus and a hyperbolic parable all stitched together with the thematic thread of “Sin and Forgiveness”. Matthew, probably more overtly than any other of the Gospel writers, has deep concerns about how we are to exist as a Christian community. Many scholars believe that Matthew’s community was a collection of largely Jewish Jesus-followers who had recently left, been kicked out of, or were alienated from their synagogue communities. Estranged from their religious, social, and cultural home among their Jewish siblings, they had to figure out what it meant to exist as a community in an urban area where they had to “carve out an identity among many competing possibilities”. Matthew’s is the only Gospel to employ the Greek word *ekklesia*, translated as *assembly*. This Gospel is not written for a stable institution of folks who have their community structure figured out and pages of bylaws to follow. Instead, the original audience was most likely a fragile, hurting, vulnerable collection of folks trying to navigate a new kind of community amid hurt and uncertainty.

The first part of this section is commonly referred to as Matthew’s section on “church discipline”, as it discusses how to deal with a member who has sinned against another member of the church. The fact that this section is preceded by Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep (which was omitted in this Year’s Matthew readings), indicates that the goal of such

actions is ultimately to reconcile and restore to the community the one who has gone astray.

After the parable of the lost sheep and the caring shepherd, Matthew turns to the topic of sin and forgiveness. Matthew is not prone to sugar-coating much of anything and he gives this subject the same treatment. He assumes the community will experience pain, conflict, struggle and disagreement as they figure out what it means to be Christ-followers amid conflict, Roman occupation, and competing allegiances. While Matthew doesn't shy away from his particular brand of intense and hyperbolic declarations, this text feels refreshingly honest about the struggles of living in community. In a time when so many in our churches are asking "Can't we all just get along?", Matthew answers "No. But we have a plan for that."

For many of us, reconciliation and forgiveness are more easily said than received or offered. Matthew specifies a multi-step process for reconciliation. In short, the steps Jesus lays out here are not a mere blueprint so much as a statement of communal values and an acknowledgment of both the frailty, as well as the utter necessity of communal discernment. Love requires that we address the inevitable conflicts that will arise among us. It is not enough to sweep them under the rug and allow them to fester. Unaddressed conflicts can render a community unable to function as God hopes, but rejection should not be our first instinct. Separation is not to be taken lightly even when it proves

necessary.

Jesus urges his disciples to have honest conversation in private with the offending party. No passive-aggressive behaviour, no “triangulation”, just forthright conversation. We know that it is much easier to complain to others about the one who has offended us than to talk to the offending person, but Jesus leaves no room for such self-absorbed grudge-nursing. Restoring a broken relationship is to begin with conversation between the parties concerned.

The subject matter here is fitting for Christian communities in every age, place and situation. One of the things that plagues most Christian and many other communities is the lack of ability to handle confrontation, disagreement and our mutual accountability when it comes to brokenness. We simply don't know how to live together, fight together, and stay together.

If the offending member refuses to listen, Jesus advises bringing along one or two others as witnesses for further conversation. And if the member still refuses to listen, the matter may be brought before the whole church. It is important to note that this is not a matter reserved only for church leaders, but for the whole community. If the member refuses to listen to the whole assembly of the faithful, then and only then is the member to be treated “as a Gentile and a tax collector”.

Yet, in the context of Matthew's story, a Gentile or tax collector is not someone who is beyond the reach of God's mercy. In fact, Jesus makes a point of reaching out to sinners such as these.

If it becomes necessary to exclude someone from the church for the sake of the integrity and well-being of the community, this is never a final judgment. A community with Jesus as its Lord and judge is one that is always seeking to restore the lost — like the lost sheep.

The focus then moves to another dimension of reconciliation — forgiveness. Peter, asks the question that perhaps we all would like to ask. Is there no limit to forgiveness? Must we forgive over and over, even if the offending person does not seem to change? “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

Peter answers his own question, suggesting seven times. Jesus raises the stakes, “seventy-seven times” or as it can also be translated, “seventy times seven”. Whatever the number, whether 77 or 490, most interpreters understand that *limitless forgiveness* is to be the practice of Jesus-followers.

The number seven symbolizes wholeness or completeness, and so seven times is not a bad guess on Peter's part. Even so, it does not begin to fathom the depths of God's mercy. In teaching that we must

forgive seventy times seven, Jesus speaks of an endless abundance of forgiveness — forgiveness that is absolute, complete, and beyond calculation. In order to illustrate the point, Jesus tells a parable about a king who forgave a servant an enormous debt, only to find that the forgiven servant refused to have mercy on a fellow servant who owed him a sum that was paltry by comparison.

The amount owed to the servant by his fellow servant was one hundred denarii, the equivalent of one day's wages. This is not a trifling amount for a servant, to be sure, but it pales in comparison to the extravagant amount the servant owed the king — ten thousand talents. A talent was the largest unit of money, the equivalent of 6,000 denarii, and so ten thousand talents would equal 60 million denarii. Figuring a six-day work week, that means that 10,000 talents would be the equivalent of around 200,000 years of wages! This is a debt almost beyond calculation, one that no person could possibly pay in a lifetime, or in many lifetimes.

One wonders why the king was so foolish as to allow such an accumulation of debt in the first place. In any case, when it is clear that the servant cannot pay, he initially orders that the servant and his wife and children be sold as slaves, along with their property, in order to repay at least a tiny fraction of the debt. The servant, however, falls on his knees and begs the king, "Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything." This is a preposterous promise, and the king knows it. There is no way the servant could ever repay such an enormous

amount. Yet the servant's plea moves the king to compassion, so that he not only releases the man, but cancels his entire debt.

The forgiven servant then encounters a fellow servant who owes him one hundred denarii. In a gesture totally at odds with the mercy he has just received, he seizes his fellow servant by the throat and demands: "Pay what you owe". And even when the fellow servant pleads with him using almost exactly the same words that he himself had used before the king, "Have patience with me, and I will repay you," the servant refuses and has his fellow servant thrown into prison.

The servant's actions suggest that he did not comprehend the enormity of the debt forgiven him by the king, nor has he realized the intrinsic connection between being forgiven and freely forgiving another. When the king hears about the servant's actions, he is so outraged that he repeals his forgiveness and throws the servant into prison. "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you," Jesus tells us, "if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

These are heavy words. We know what Jesus asks of us, and we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors". Still it seems so difficult, even impossible, to forgive from the heart. Yet Jesus' parable illustrates why forgiveness is so important. The alternative to forgiveness is a heart grown hard with resentment; it is alienation from one another, and in the worst case, violence. A world

without forgiveness is a world of relational wreckage, the opposite of the wholeness and fullness of life God intends for us.

So how do we forgive from the heart? It helps to remember that to forgive is not to deny the pain or wrongness of an act; it is not to excuse that which is unjust or hurtful, nor is it to tolerate abuse. Remember what Jesus has already said about confronting the one who has wronged you. Yet in confronting our brother or sister, we also come face to face with our own sin and brokenness and realize that we are alike in our utter dependence on God's grace.

The outrageous numbers that Jesus uses in his parable are there to make a point. It is not really about the numbers. Forgiveness, Jesus tells us, is not a quantifiable commodity. It is a qualitatively different way of life, drawn from the very being of God, whose nature is to be gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and whose ultimate goal is always reconciliation and restoration of community.

The basic point seems to be clear: God, who forgives, expects Jesus-followers to forgive one another; if they don't, there will be terrible (eschatological) consequences. God is understood to forgive freely, abundantly, repeatedly and unconditionally. That is God's "job description". Reading of this parable to identify the king as God, who forgives the first slave so generously, contributes to this picture.

But the rest of the parable offers two caveats. One is a connection between divine and human forgiveness. The second is that divine forgiveness is conditional. People must forgive other people to know God's forgiveness. The parable has contributed a widespread understanding especially among Christian groups that people are to forgive offending people freely and unconditionally. In popular parlance, "forgive and forget" is common advice. Forgiveness has come to be seen as beneficial for victims and perpetrators.

It is not that simple for several reasons. Emotions are not easily tamed and there are other issues of power and justice. The parable frames forgiveness only as a top-down phenomenon from the more powerful to the less powerful. The king forgives the slave-official who should forgive his less powerful slave-official. But it does not present a scenario of a lower-status person injured by a higher-status or more powerful offender. What roles do repentance and restitution (justice) play?

Is forgiveness obligatory? Discussions of intimate partner violence, whether enacted by a male or female, identify several actions for the offender: confess; evidence repentance; make restitution (justice); undergo a change of heart or identity. Then, and only then, does the abused person have one obligation, to forego revenge with forgiveness. Without the offender's verifiable actions, the offended or abused person has no obligation to forgive.

We cannot be faithful to God if we do not apply loving, caring, nourishing discipline to our life together as a church. Today's gospel stresses the duty of speaking out against the evil not just in our church communities, but also in our society. This duty, to correct and put things on the right path, falls to each one of us by virtue of our Baptism. We are all called to be a prophet, that is someone who speaks for God.

We should not remain silent, not in our families, not in our churches, not in our communities, not in our society, when silence can be taken to mean that we approve of what is happening. What the world expects of Christians is that we speak out loud and clear, and that we voice their condemnations in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, can arise in the heart of the simplest person. And we must always act with compassion and generosity, so that all those whom we encounter, will know that we are true followers of Christ.

Amen.

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT PRAYERS FOR FEBRUARY 26

In this season of repentance and healing, we accept God's invitation to be ever mindful of the needs of others, offering our prayers on behalf of God's community in the church and the world saying...God of life...**Hear our prayer**

Let us pray for the well-being of creation ... Renew all waters, lands, skies to reflect your glory and guide us to be respectful in how we use all earthly resources.

God of life ... **Hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for all nations and people ... Grant justice where there is inequity, peace where there is conflict, and wisdom for all who lead. Open our minds to the calamity of war, its evil nature. Help us to understand the power of bearing witness in these times, with the wars and conflicts in Ukraine, Israel/Palestine, South Sudan, Syria and Haiti, devastating those nations and their people.

God of life ... **Hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for all who are facing natural disasters compounded by social and political upheaval. It becomes crisis within crisis. We mourn for the peoples of Syria and Turkey, as they deal with the terrible aftermath of the devastating earthquakes.

God of life ... **Hear our prayer.**

We mourn for those "captive" in detention centres, in decades-old refugee camps; those with no homeland and those exiled. Cloak the forgotten; those left behind; the many persons of color who, due to prejudice and injustices, are languishing in prisons; those crushed or detained at borders living neither here nor there. Wake us up to the wanton neglect of our role, our covenant, as neighbours and as stewards of the planet. We hear of the 2 million refugees from Ukraine now in Poland, and of the 1 million taken in by Germany. We pray that you would provide the newcomers who have arrived in Canada with hope and support as they build a new life for themselves and their families.

God of life ... **Hear our prayer.**

We know war in one place affects us all. We ask that leaders find a way for international disarmament treaties to be renewed. Help us to understand that Russia needs help to transition to climate-friendly energy industries as well as Europe, the U.S. North Korea, South Korea and China. War is not green; it is grey, bloody, and cold.

God of life ... **Hear our prayer.**

Nootka Island and its people of the sovereign Mowachaht/Muchalaht Nation are calling for salmon parks, which could be a visionary way to restore and repair forests by using management practices that avoid clear cut logging. Call us, O God, to reckon with our extraction mindset, our plundering and destruction of streams to sea, leaving steep slopes exposed to erosion and mudslides that create further ruin and destruction. Give courage and determination to our leaders to make bold decisions that uphold and protect the well being of our natural resources and entrench the rights of Indigenous peoples throughout our country.

God of life ... **Hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for all in need ... Provide caring communities for all who are burdened by guilt, shame, addiction, and illness ... Keep safe and warm those who are homeless and struggling with daily hardships. Preserve them from all pain and adversity.

God of life ... **Hear our prayer.**

Let us give thanks for the faithful departed whose transgressions are forgiven and who now rejoice in life eternally spent with you. Lead us in their path.

God of life ... **Hear our prayer.**

Fill us with your strength and a compelling vision of your world as it ought to be that we might resist the seduction of our foolish desires and the tempter's vain delights; that we may walk in obedience and righteousness, rejoicing in you with an upright heart. Let us stand in "the bond of our common humanity" and softly whisper, or sing and shout: "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! May it be so."

Amen.