

Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:1-13
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Sermon September 17th, 2023

Forgiveness Cleanses Our Hearts!

Last week, Jesus teaches us how to set healthy boundaries when someone keeps hurting us.

In our gospel for this week, Peter's response to Jesus' teachings around healthy boundaries is to seek some clarification about the act of forgiveness. Peter asks, "How often then should one forgive someone who hurts them?" Jesus says "seventy-seven times," which means always.

Now, we cannot hear this week's invitation to forgive seventy-seven times without remembering Jesus' teaching from last week. Forgiving someone who hurts us again and again doesn't mean continuing to be in relationship with them. Sometimes reconciliation can't happen if the person hurting us is incapable of repenting for their hurtful behaviours. Jesus isn't expecting us to tolerate an abusive relationship.

Instead, Jesus is inviting us to let go of that urge to get even with someone who hurts us (**Image One**: warzone). If we cannot reconcile with someone based on their inability to repent, we can still let go of the anger inside us. For our safety and wellbeing, we can walk away from the relationship, and wish them well. We can pray that God will change their heart (**Image Two**: someone praying). Remember, earlier in Jesus' ministry he invites us to love our enemies, or those who continually hurt us, by praying for them.

What Douglas R. A. Hare argues in his commentary on Matthew is that Jesus is referring back to Genesis 4:24 where a person by the name Lamech promises to avenge anyone who hurts him seventy-seven times (**Image One**). Jesus is challenging this promise by Lamech by inviting us, his disciples, to do the opposite. To let go of that need to get even with the people who hurt us seventy-seven times (**Image Two**).

Because when we are unable to forgive, when we strive to hurt others like they hurt us we are not living out our calling to love one another as Jesus loves us. Instead, our hearts are filled with anger, bitterness, and hatred. Making it very difficult for us to live out the gospel.

In our reading of Genesis, we see an example of what Jesus hopes for in our relationships with one another when repentance does happen (**Image Three**: two people embracing each other with hug). Joseph has the opportunity to get even with his brothers for selling him into slavery. However, Joseph can see that his brothers are vulnerable. Are ready

to repent for how they treated Joseph. So, Joseph chooses to forgive his brothers, and reconcile with them.

Jesus invites us to do the same. Whether it is letting go of the anger, and wishing those who are unrepentant for their hurtful actions well (**Image Two**). Or, forgiving and reconciling with someone who is repentant, or someone who looks like they are ready to repent (**Image Three**).

Now, I know. Sometimes this is hard for us to do. Especially when someone is unrepentant. Or their repentance is followed by the same hurtful action towards us again and again. Some could argue that this isn't really practicing repentance either, since repentance isn't just saying sorry. It is changing one's behaviours.

Sometimes we need to forgive over and over again to convince ourselves to let go of the anger inside us. Before we are ready to wish someone well, or to pray for their hearts to change (**Image Two**).

I know forgiveness is hard enough when someone is genuinely repentant. How can we always forgive?

But when we can let go of that need to get even (**Image One**). When we can stop the perpetual cycle of violence and hurtful actions that happen when we are unable to forgive. When we can cleanse our hearts from the hurt. Then we are free to be loving to one another.

When Jesus sees that the disciples are struggling with this concept, Jesus goes on to share a parable with them that talks about how abundant God's grace is for us, as well as, God's expectation for us to do likewise to one another.

If we think about it for a moment, how often does God forgive us when we fail to live up to God's calling for us? God is forgiving us over and over again. Sometimes several times a day. This is why Luther believed we should enter into confession every day, and take communion as often as we can. Because we are sinners, but also, because God is gracious and merciful.

Even when we struggle to repent, God gives us opportunity after opportunity to make it right. God doesn't give up on us. God's grace abounds (**Image Three**).

Probably, because, God has seen what can happen when God's anger is allowed to fester. God remembers the devastation of the flood.

This is why Jesus gets so frustrated with us when we choose to get even with someone who hurts us versus forgiving them. Jesus sees the potential destruction that can happen to us, and to our community, when we choose not to forgive (**Image One**).

When we can let go of the anger inside us, and forgive them. Wishing them well. Praying from a safe distance for their hearts to change, as we set healthy boundaries and accountability measures (**Image Two**). Then we can stop the destruction that comes with getting even. Then we can live out the gospel, the good news, that states that Jesus sends us forth to live out Jesus' life-giving love in the communities we enter.

Let us pray, gracious God, thank you for forgiving us over and over again when we fall short of your glory. When we fail to live out your love in our lives. When we are hurt by others help us forgive like you forgive us. Help us let go of the anger inside us that motivates us to get even. Instead, motivate us to love one another. In Jesus name we pray, **Amen.**

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