

How Many Times

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

What do you think the defining characteristic of a Christian or a Christian community should be? There could be a number of possible answers:

- Faith.
- Hope.
- Love.

Each would be a good candidate.

But a very good case could be made that it should be Forgiveness.

Our Gospel reading today forces us to realise the importance of forgiveness experienced, understood and offered.

Yet how many times have we seen Churches, Christians, even ourselves fail at this basic Christian virtue. If someone were to come into St. Davids with a forgive-o-meter where would we score, if it was pointed at me how would I rate, and what about you?

Forgive me but I think forgiveness is something we all need to keep learning about.

HOW MANY TIMES

As we return to Matthew, Jesus has been teaching his disciples about how to deal with sin within the Christian community. Followers of Jesus are to follow the example of their God who wants to bring back lost sheep. Sin is to be challenged so that those who have strayed can be brought back to the fold.

At this point Peter jumps in, in his usual impetuous way, to ask how many times this process should work, how many times should he forgive someone who sins against him. He offers up what he thinks is an impressively forgiving total of seven as a possible answer.

Jesus' response blows such thinking out of the water, as he says not seven times, but seventy seven times or perhaps seventy times seven, it is hard to decide which the Greek intends. In once sense it makes little difference if the answer is 77 or 490, the answer to "times how" is "many" so stop counting.

I can illustrate this by letting you into a professional secret about clergy. When we are at the front leading the service looking caringly and enquiringly out at our congregation I have to confess at least some of the time we are trying to count how many people are here. Now for me, being a male and finding multi tasking difficult, I can just about pull this off at the 8am service, but even then if there are anywhere near twenty I get too distracted. I never make it at the 10am so I don't bother. We are to not bother trying to count how many times we forgive our fellow Christian.

But there is more going on here than that. Way back in Genesis after humanity had turned away from God they embraced the way of retribution and revenge. An unpleasant character called Lamech declares "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." (Genesis 2:23-24)

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I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING ... 'DID HE FORGIVE ME SEVENTY TIME SEVEN TIMES, OR ONLY SEVENTY TIME SIX TIMES?'

Jesus in what he says to Peter is saying that within his people there is to be a complete renunciation of the ways of revenge, retribution, and reprisal. Following on from the teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, the time of an eye for an eye has gone, but rather love for the enemy, for those who have hurt us. How many times have we failed here, seven times, seventy seven, seventy times seven, seven knows.

THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY

To explain this revolutionary concept of renouncing revenge and fully following forgiveness Jesus tells an exaggerated story of extraordinary forgiveness and inexcusable failure.

Extraordinary Forgiveness

Jesus compares the Kingdom of heaven to a king who is settling his accounts. In doing so he comes across one slave whose debt is truly astounding. This is debt on the scale of Greece or Portugal, there is no way that he can pay this back, he is going to default and it is his fault, his only hope is a massive rescue package.

Amazingly the King listens to his cry for mercy, and goes far beyond what is asked for, he is not simply given more time the whole debt is cancelled, the slate is wiped clean, he is set completely free.

This is a wonderful picture of the forgiveness we receive from God. We do not stand before our creator God in a neutral position, but because of his holiness and our sin we are deep, deep in his debt. Furthermore it is debt we are not able to, and will never be able to repay. Our only hope is a rescue package not from the IMF, but from OHF, our heavenly Father. This is, of course what God is doing in Jesus, who we have been told right at the beginning of the Gospel will save the people from their sins. (Matthew 1:21)

We will not be able to grasp the Bible's teaching on forgiveness unless we grasp this point, our deep need of God's forgiveness and how it is graciously, outrageously given freely when we call on God for mercy.

It is only in understanding our need of forgiveness and by experiencing its liberating power that we are able to show the kind of forgiveness Jesus is teaching here.

Inexcusable Failure

If the King's behaviour is extraordinary the slave's subsequent action is inexcusable, almost unimaginable.

As he makes his way out of the King's presence, having been let off this huge national debt sized account, he finds a fellow slave with whom he had a "deal made at the pub" account and demands repayment immediately. Also we should not the violence of the encounter, reminiscent of The Simpsons with Homer throttling Bart. With his hands around his throat his is a demand made with menaces.

The other slave uses words calling for mercy which are almost an exact echo of what the first slave has just said to the king. Yet unmoved the slave throws his debtor into prison.

Unsurprisingly the king is told of this callous behaviour and calls the slave back to account for his actions and face judgement.

Jesus ends with a warning that this is how our heavenly Father will treat us if we do not forgive each other from the heart.

Jesus could not really make his point more clearly. God's forgiveness is freely given to us as we are, but we are to live in the light of such forgiveness as we deal with others.

We may think the story just a little too exaggerated, a little too over the top, but I wonder if it is actually particularly true for us Anglicans. Each service we are reminded of God's mercy as we confess our sins and are assured of God's forgiveness. In Communion we are reminded that Christ's body and blood were given for the remission

of sins. At each service we ask God to forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us, which I have heard described as the most dangerous prayer in the world. Our services are soaked in reminders of God's grace and forgiveness, yet how many times have Anglicans then gone to morning tea unreconciled with each other, hurt, unforgiving, bitter. Have we then really understood what God has done for us? What would our heavenly father say to us?

FURTHER THINKING ABOUT FORGIVENESS

More than forgetting

If practising forgiveness is so important I hope you will forgive me if I spend a bit of time on what forgiveness is.

I think there are times that confusion is caused as people think that forgiveness is essentially forgetting that something happened, after all forgive and forget.

I very, very rarely watched any of Oprah but I remember once seeing a portion where she interviewed someone who I think was called Pastor Tim, and he said "Forgiveness is giving up the right to be angry." And I thought that is brilliant. For it recognises that something has happened, it is not simply forgetting that something has happened.

As we see in the parable that Jesus is taught there is an accounting, it is not as if the slave is simply let off, but the king forgoes his right to repayment. Forgiveness knows that something bad has happened but forgoes its right to be angry.

The need for repentance

But I believe there is more to forgiveness as well, for what is pictured here is not simply forgiving someone, it is forgiving someone who has asked for it. In order for forgiveness to really work two people need to be involved, one needs to ask, the other needs to give.

If you try to forgive someone who doesn't say they are sorry all you are doing is judging them. If I was to say to my wife "Darling I forgive you for last night's dinner" where do you think I will be sleeping?

It is only when there is repentance that forgiveness can really be offered. It is of course this way with God as well. When we repent there is forgiveness, when we don't judgement is all that is left.

Remember that this is being taught in the context of the community of Jesus followers, the aim is to be reconciled with a brother or a sister within the community of faith. This means that along with the direct teaching about forgiveness there is the implied teaching about repentance. Not only do we need people who are ready to forgive but also ready to apologise and repent. This means more than simply saying sorry. Often "sorry" is used to mean "I am sorry that you feel that way" without actually taking responsibility for our own actions and attitudes. True repentance takes responsibility and seeks to put things right. Again this is what happens in the story, the slaves seek to make restoration, they know they are truly responsible and want the situation put right.

How can I forgive?

None of this necessarily makes forgiveness easier and many questions remain. There will be people who do not repent, how are we to feel towards them? Some of you may have experienced unimaginable hurt by someone. How do you forgive them.

I don't think we simply put it in the too hard basket.

Jesus teaching will not let us.

We certainly have to renounce the ways of revenge, we may not be able to be reconciled to them but we can still give up our right to be angry with them. Jesus says this also needs to be from the heart, it is a decision in the core of our being.

This remains hard, oh so hard but this is where the core Christian virtues of faith, hope and love come into play and support forgiveness. We forgive in faith, in hope and in love.

We forgive in faith.

For we believe that what Jesus teaches us is the way to live as hard as it may seem. As difficult as it can be it is what Jesus calls us to do and demonstrated to us and we should trust him

We forgive in hope.

A day is coming when things will be put right and all people will be called to account, wrong will be dealt with. We know that God is just we can leave our hurt and pain in his hands.

We forgive in love.

We reflect the same kind of loving forgiveness that we have received from God. For as we are encouraged to forgive from the heart we are reminded that this is also the heart of God to forgive. It is an expression of his love. He is gracious and compassionate towards us, he has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west, the price is paid, the debt is cancelled, we are set free. Forgiveness is not easy, there is a cost but on the cross we see that God is willing to pay that cost. That is his heart and realising this must surely change ours.

How many times do we need to be reminded of this, seven times, seventy seven times, seventy times seven times? As God's forgiveness is beyond reckoning so our need is beyond counting. But in realising our forgiveness in him let us forgive each other as many times as it takes.