
Forgiveness – For Good!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 19, Year A

Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18:21-22)

When the little boy is told by his mother that he has to brush his teeth tonight, and wash his face, he replies, “But I brushed them last night! I washed my face last night. How many times do I have to do it?”

When the woman gently complains to her husband that he hasn’t told her that he loves her, he says, “Yes, I did. I told you a couple of weeks ago that I loved you. How many times do I have to do it?”

Every one of us, at some age or another, learns this lesson: The things worth doing in this life, are worth doing again and again. We learn something, something wonderful. We do something, something wonderful. And then we have to do it again, as if it is a practice, over and over again.

The things worth doing in this life are rarely accomplished in just one episode. The things that count in life, the values that form us, the activities that create our character, the disciplines that form our bodies – all these things become real when they become habits for us, practices, not one-time –performative—superstar events.

We have to wash our face more than once. We have to say “I love you,” more than once. We have to exercise, we have to eat well, more than once. In fact, we have to do those things regularly, almost daily, really, if we want to make those activities real in our lives.

Well, it’s the same thing with spirituality. Spirituality is not a one-time miraculous event that changes our lives completely and forever, without our ever having to worry about it again. Effective spirituality is a practice, a habit, a routine.

That is why, when Peter asks Jesus whether he (Peter) should forgive as many as seven times, Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18.22). Jesus means that forgiveness is an ongoing act, even a perpetual act. Maybe like washing your face, or saying, “I love you.” One time won’t do it. Nor will seven. Not even seventy-seven times.

It helps to understand forgiveness as a kind of release. The word, “to forgive,” actually means “to release” something, or someone –maybe even ourselves. And it is the strange nature of humanity that we seem to be always getting tangled up, knotted up, tied up in things. We start the day clear and fresh. But then we get tangled up. Relationships get cross ways. Impatience and anger grab us. We make careless comments. Soon, we need release.

There are lots of names and images we use for the church. We say the church is a body, a congregation, a community – yes, all those things. But I have another favorite image for “Church.” The church is a “Laboratory.” The church is a laboratory for forgiveness.

The church is where we test forgiveness, and experiment with forgiveness, and practice forgiveness. Over time, it is the church where we learn how to forgive, and where we learn how to be forgiven. Maybe this is

because there are so many mistakes in church, and so much imperfection, all in the same place where people generally want to do the right thing. And yet, we don't, over and over again, and all on top of each other.

I will tell you a secret: Forgiveness is one of the ways I determine how often someone goes to church. A lot of people claim that they are spiritual, or that they are Christian, or that they are members of a church. But I can never tell, merely by what they say.

I can tell people who go to church by how they are able to forgive and be forgiven. Yes, for me, the key evidence of whether someone goes to church, is whether they know how to forgive, whether they have learned forgiveness in the great laboratory of forgiveness, the church. Those who attend faithfully are accustomed to forgiveness, comfortable with forgiveness.

Of course, forgiveness makes *all* of us uncomfortable; but it makes some people *truly* uncomfortable. There are people, I have heard, who claim that they have never had to ask for forgiveness, that they have never *asked* for forgiveness.

Well, forgiveness is the best evidence that someone attends church, or is a Christian. If we do not practice forgiveness, maybe we haven't really practiced Christianity yet.

Yes, of course, all forgiven people are tempted by opportunities to lash out against someone else. That is exactly the tragedy of today's gospel parable in the Book of Matthew. The forgiven servant is grateful, but he immediately loses that gratitude when he is unable to pass on the forgiveness, the release. He was released, but he cannot release another; instead, he attacks the other, and binds the other. He has not learned from church community, the laboratory of forgiveness.

The Gospel of Matthew says that he was thus handed over to be tormented. (The better word is tormented, not tortured.) To be unable to forgive is to be tormented. Tormented, by past hurts and wrongs and resentments. They can be tremendous, as deep as a wilderness pit, and as heavy as burdensome chains in a prison. Those chains and pits are signs of unforgiveness. We cling to past wrongs as if they were chains clinging on to us.

Well, it was a wilderness pit that the dreamer, Joseph, in the book of Genesis, had been cast into by his brothers! Then, it was a prison that Joseph had been thrown into, while in Egypt. The young boy, Joseph, knew suffering and betrayal from his own brothers. But, somehow, I think he learned to forgive while he was there. And, somehow, it was forgiveness that raised him from that pit and out of that prison.

And, then, the famous story of Joseph contains the great verse that we heard in today's Genesis passage. After his brothers appear before Joseph, in front of Joseph's power to exact vengeance, Joseph does not choose vengeance. He says, "you meant it for harm, but God meant it for good." For Good.

Each of us has choices in life. Every day. We can choose harm, or we can choose good. Yes, we can choose vengeance every day. We can make a practice of vengeance. Or, we can choose forgiveness. We can practice forgiveness and grace every day.

That forgiveness, that grace, is what made Joseph's people great. And that grace is what makes God's people great. It is not vengeance that makes a people great. It is forgiveness that makes a people great, makes a family great, makes a church great.

Both sides of forgiveness—the receiving and the giving—are critical: receiving forgiveness and giving forgiveness. Receiving release and giving release. Being forgiven is merely the first part of the process. Full forgiveness is not complete until we have passed that forgiveness on to someone else! Forgiveness is being released ourselves, and then going out and releasing someone else!

It is truly one of the major principles of the Christian life. To release. For, when we release others, we suddenly feel ourselves released, too. When we let go of what we believe people owe us, then it is we who feel wonderfully free. The way God sets people free, is by using people to do it! God uses us to set his people free.

"You meant it for harm," Joseph says, "but God meant it for good." He was practicing forgiveness, just as Jesus would teach, just as Peter would learn. It is not a one-time event. Forgiveness occurs seven times, and seventy times seven times. It becomes a circle of release, a practice, a habit. And that habit forms character, the character of greatness, for the good. That habit of forgiveness creates good faith.

AMEN.

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