

Sermon for Pentecost 17 (19A)  
Christ Church, Andover  
September 11, 2005  
The Rev. Jeffrey Gill

Matthew 18:21-35

It was three years ago on this Sunday that I first stood in this pulpit as the new Priest-in-Charge here at Christ Church, and today I stand here for my last time in that role. I remember that first Sunday, because we read this very same Gospel, and I preached a sermon about forgiveness.

I find myself today reflecting not only on these three years here with all of you, but also reflecting on this three-year lectionary cycle that keeps bringing us back around to these hard sayings of Jesus, and I have to ask myself whether I've become any better at it – at forgiveness, that is – than I was three years ago. How have I grown (or have I?) in my own spiritual life – not only with regard to forgiveness, but to all the many aspects of the spiritual life to which I am called and we all are called as Christians. We do have to take stock once in a while. Perhaps that's one of the gifts of our liturgical tradition and the fact that we have this lectionary that keeps bringing us back around. On the one hand, we never get let off the hook. We can't choose to ignore any of these words of Jesus, because they just keep coming back around, and we get to look inside ourselves one more time and wonder how in the world it is that we can possibly grow into the people God wants us to be. And at the same time, we get to take stock – how am I doing? Where have I made progress? Or have I?

So here we are, talking about forgiveness once again.

It's amazing how when this subject comes up, everyone has a story. And it's usually about the challenge, the difficulty either in giving or receiving forgiveness.

Today is September 11<sup>th</sup>. We can hardly speak those words without thinking of the atrocities committed four years ago today. How do we talk about forgiveness in relation to those events?

We've just experienced the biggest natural disaster in American history less than two weeks ago, compounded by negligence and unpreparedness of human-making on a monumental scale. How do we talk about forgiveness in relation to those events?

We've just been exposed to the harsh realities of poverty in America – again – after not talking about it at all in our national discourse for the past twenty years. How shall we talk about forgiveness in relation to this reality?

Most of what we think about, however, when we speak of forgiveness hits home for us at a much more personal level.

- What about that painful family situation we're dealing with? Where are we finding forgiveness there?

- What about the need to find forgiveness with a friend who has betrayed us? How are we doing with that one?
- Or that hard feeling we have been nursing for years toward the teacher who may have judged us wrongly, or an employer who may have treated us unfairly? Where are we with that?
- What about the conflict we've been experiencing with the person we thought we had such a trusting relationship with?

I saw a man break into tears just yesterday recounting the time when a guidance counselor told him he wouldn't be able to go to college, because his family didn't have the money. He was still angry when he thought about it. He had gone to college anyway and proved her wrong, but those feelings of resentment were still there, over twenty years later. I listened this week as someone told me about a family relationship gone bad that has been unresolved for years, wondering how forgiveness could ever be found. We've all had to wonder from time to time, whether we ourselves were going to be able to forgive that family member, or perhaps the bully from our junior high school class, or perhaps even a fellow member of the church who said or did something hurtful to us.

What DO we do with these feelings?

As with so many of the stories of Jesus, the parable of the debtors arose out of a question that was posed to Jesus. Simon Peter said to him: "Lord, if another member of the church (or "my brother," as he actually says in the original) sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times? He is expecting Jesus to say: "Excellent Peter! You go to the head of the class. You get A+." Based on what was required in the law, Peter had the right to think that he had done something good, stepped it up right in the way Jesus would want him to do. The law of Moses said: "If someone transgresses one time, forgive him. If he transgresses two times, forgive him. If he transgresses three times, forgive him. If he transgresses four times, do not forgive him." So, what Peter has done is to take this law of limited forgiveness, multiply it by two and add one – take it up to the perfect number – 7 – and then sit back with a smile on his face and say: Now how is that for being a great guy? And he surely must have been taken aback when Jesus said, "Not seven times, but I tell you seventy times seven" – a phrase that would have been like us saying today "a zillion trillion times." In other words, "don't even try to keep count."

Then Jesus proceeded to tell a story – one with all the hyperbolic extremes we come to expect from the storytelling tradition of Jesus' time. There was a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. He found one who owed him 10,000 talents (which was an enormous sum of money) and, because he could not pay, he was about to have him thrown into jail and his wife and children sold into slavery, which is what was permitted during Roman times. In response to the man's plea for mercy, however, he forgave him the entire debt.

Whereupon that forgiven servant went to a fellow servant who owed *him* 100 denarii (which was a very small sum of money) and demanded payment. The debtor pleaded for extra time, an extension, but the man would not hear of it and he had him thrown into jail. This story got back to the king, who went into a rage. He called in the forgiven servant and said that

because he had been forgiven his debt, so, too, he should have mercy on them who had wronged him. And because he had not, he was handed over to be punished until he paid his debt.

Now the question is, what was Jesus really saying to Simon Peter in this little story? He was saying that forgiveness carries a heavy price. The one who has been forgiven must also become a forgiving soul.

Now it's real hard for *perfect* people to forgive others. Perfect people have very high standards! And since they have no need to be forgiven themselves, they don't see any particular reason to forgive others. That doesn't apply to too many of us! A community of perfect people could be, ironically, a very unforgiving place! Now I know this is Andover, but I don't think we have to worry about that, even here! The closest thing we'll find to a community of perfect people on this earth, is a community of people who all recognize their own need of forgiveness, and are willing to forgive others accordingly. That's what Jesus wanted the church to be.

At the same time, forgiveness can never be understood as something that is soft and sentimental, arising from a sort of passivity or indifference to wrong. That would be "cheap grace." As one theologian has said, forgiveness "is not permissiveness or the absence of any sense of ethical standards. On the contrary, there can be no forgiveness without standards and values being violated" (Fred Craddock, 441). Forgiveness is always the response to *repentance*, or a recognition of wrongdoing, and never a pretending that no wrong has been done.

Jesus' very serious and demanding standards for forgiveness certainly do not preclude some of the tough bargaining we do with ourselves and with others to get there. Sometimes it takes a "tough love" solution and a demand for change in behavior to deal with all the hurts caused by unfaithfulness, addictions, and abuse in families, or to the pettiness and jealousies that sometimes infect life in community with others, and indeed the real damage we sometimes do to one another. Is he asking us to be passive in the face of all of this? Hardly. Jesus clearly intends for us to take serious problems seriously and to take tough corrective action where it is needed. The passage just ahead of this one on forgiveness is all about the discipline of those who are unrepentant. The goal of this parable we've heard today is the forgiveness of the one who does repent.

Well, that raises an interesting question. Does repentance always have to precede forgiveness? Forgiveness would be a lot easier if we were always talking about situations where someone has actually asked for our forgiveness. Perhaps we wouldn't have to struggle so much with forgiveness if people would just ask for it. But that's often just not the case. And when there is no repentance, forgiveness is certainly a much more difficult task for us.

A young woman was interviewed recently on television after one of the London bombings. She had been on one of the bombed subway trains, and escaped with bruises and some shattered nerves. She was asked by a reporter if she could forgive those who caused the bombing. She responded with these words: "I would hope that I could, but I don't know whom to forgive. Until I am able to see the face of such hatred, I do not know how deep I must dig in my spirit to find forgiveness."

When someone repents, we see the face of the one we must forgive. When they do not, it requires us to dig down to a much deeper place within us to find forgiveness.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote a book about his experience with South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission called "No Future Without Forgiveness." He says that forgiveness involves much more than a sort of unselfish devotion to the cause of others. He even says that "to forgive is a process that does not exclude hate and anger. These emotions are all part of being human." He says, "You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things; the depth of your love is shown by the extent of your anger." He stresses that, "However, when I talk of forgiveness I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person. A better person than the one being consumed by anger and hatred. Remaining in that state locks you in a state of victimhood, making you almost dependent on the perpetrator. If you can find it in yourself to forgive then you are no longer chained to the perpetrator. You can move on, and you can even help the perpetrator to become a better person too." (see [www.theforgivenessproject.com](http://www.theforgivenessproject.com)).

That's what Jesus wanted for his disciples and by extension for the whole world – for us to learn to forgive one another; and when we have been forgiven that we learn to do the same for others who will then also do the same for others.

Three years down the road together, how are we doing? I, for one, am certainly more aware than ever of my own need of forgiveness. I hope it is making me a more forgiving person.