

September 11, 2011 13th Sunday After Pentecost Matthew 18:21-35

Numerous people have noted that the Bible readings about forgiveness appointed for today coincide with the anniversary of the major terrorist attacks ten years ago. Lutheran theologian Brian Stoffregen I think rightly points out that the forgiveness Jesus is talking about is forgiveness between Christians, and is not truly applicable to the context of terrorists. And yet, like last week when we read about Jesus talking about conflict between Christians, there are solid principles of forgiveness that we can apply.

If you happen to remember last week's readings you'll remember the goal always was to restore relationships that were broken. Even kicking someone out of the church was to be done in a way that was ultimately intended to bring him or her back in. Similarly Jesus' principles behind forgiveness are intended to restore relationships.

Picking up exactly where we stopped our gospel reading last week Peter asks how many times should other Christians be forgiven? Seven times was the standard Jewish answer. You were

to forgive someone seven times for the same offense. That's a pretty big number. If you make a mistake I'm likely to forgive you quite easily. If you repeat the mistake or the thing that hurt me I'll probably forgive you again, albeit more grudgingly. Ask me to forgive you after the third time and you'll really try my patience. Truly forgiving you for an offense after the fourth time is probably not going to happen; especially if it's for something big. And you can forget it if you want it for the fifth, sixth and seventh times.

Do you see how the Jewish expectations of forgiveness seven times is extremely generous? Peter's question is at the extremes. And yet Jesus' reply is to take the extremes and make them far bigger. He says not seven times but seventy seven times -or as it can be translated seventy times seven, for a total of 490. The final number doesn't much matter. With me you're pushing your luck to get forgiven four or five times for the same offense. Seven's a real stretch. You can forget 77 times.

But Jesus backs up this absurdly high number with a parable, the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. A slave owed

his master 10,000 talents. To say that's a lot of money is an understatement. Even the federal government would consider that a lot of money. There's no official exchange rate between the current dollar and 1st Century Roman currency, but a talent is somewhere between \$600,000 and \$1,000,000. And this guy owes 10,000 of them. So roughly 6 to 10 billion dollars, give or take a few hundred million.

I don't know about you, but I can barely conceive of the buying power of several billion dollars, let alone wrack up a debt that high. If this were to happen today we'd call it a major corporate scandal. This debt is colossal. But the guy begs for mercy from his master and amazingly the master agrees.

But his gratitude doesn't translate into mercy. When a fellow slave owes him 100 denarii, or about 15 to 20 thousand dollars, he has him thrown into debtors prison. 15 to 20 thousand dollars is a significant debt, yes, but one that can certainly be repaid. When the master finds out what has happened he has the first slave thrown into prison until he repays his debt, which of course he'll never do.

You don't have to think too hard to understand that God forgives us greatly and so we should forgive in return. But what does this look like? It is easy to imagine forgiveness like this turning into exploitation. In the case of the parable the forgiveness is predicated by the offender feeling sorry for his actions. Does this mean that every time someone says they're sorry for what they've done for us we must forgive them? How can we be sure they are truly sorry? I've done enough work with prisoners to know how convincing a "Jailhouse Jesus" act can look when a prisoner is coming up for parole. But you don't have to be a prisoner to fake being sorry. Any kid out there has learned to do that. And even if a person is truly sorry, when you've forgiven someone a hundred times over for the same offense it's almost becoming a personality disorder.

If taken wrongly the extreme forgiveness that Jesus calls for can create a real mess. To avoid that we need to look again at the foundation under this forgiveness - the restoration and strengthening of relationships. Jesus' ultimate goal with this extreme forgiveness is to never give you the right to say to someone, "That's it! You're out forever and ever. You've exhausted all forgiveness and hope of restoration. I have the divine right to reject you eternally."

You can't do that with Jesus' teachings. He always wants the door kept open. Forgiveness is a big part of that. To forgive someone is to do more than let him or her get away with something. To forgive someone is to reset the relationship and begin again.

If someone wrongs you I hope you learn from it. Don't seek revenge; nor be a doormat. Don't give them the opportunity to do it again. If you let them walk all over you, you just become an enabler. But if you stick with them you may both be strengthened.

Perhaps we can even learn something about this by turning to 9-11 remembrances today. After our nation clearly knew the origin of the terrorist attacks of 10 years ago we had several options. We could have said, "We forgive you," done nothing, and left it at that. Do you think that would have been effective? Certainly not. It would have egged them on and things would have gotten worse. When you are dealing with someone who sees you as less than human and delights in hurting you a non-retaliatory approach is not effective, especially when

you have great power at your disposal. Yet you know well that there were many voices calling for just such an approach.

Should we have said, "We'll make you pay for that!" and then gotten revenge by annihilating everything in Afghanistan as well as all groups we deem to be terroristic? There were certainly voices calling for that too.

At the risk of oversimplifying very complex international politics, instead our nation indeed acted forcefully, but also constructively. We continue to be present in Afghanistan in order to build their defenses, provide stability, and create a path to health and prosperity. Many people call for us to take our troops out of Afghanistan. And again, I know I'm way oversimplifying things here, but the ongoing presence can be seen as a commitment to strengthen and rebuild broken relationships between nations. It involves some level of forgiveness, some level of accountability, and true commitment from all parties involved. There certainly are risks along the way. There are plenty of costs too - both financial and in terms of lives. The future of it all is not certain either. I personally wish it could all be simpler and more

straightforward. But the truth is relationships are complex, and they always involve some measure of the unknown.

Forgive others as you have been forgiven. Invest in others lives just as God has invested in you. Strengthen and grow your spirit and your community in order to embody God's love in your life. And be thankful to God for his eternal generosity to all those who are His children. Amen