

15th Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

Matthew 18:21-35

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.'

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Let me tell you a story about a man named Lamech. There are many important characters in the Book of Genesis and I suspect you could join me in naming several of them: Eve and her husband Adam, Sarah and her husband Abraham, Noah and his family, Jacob and his brother Esau, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and his brothers. But Lamech is a character that rarely makes that list. I suppose it's mostly because he is only mentioned briefly in the fourth chapter of Genesis. You see, Lamech is a direct descendant of Cain. Therefore, in order to understand Lamech's brief but violent tenure in the Book of Genesis, a little bit of context is in order.

Cain is, of course, more infamous than famous. His act of violence is the first of many in the Biblical narrative. Cain had a brother named Esau and no matter how hard he tried, Cain could never quite measure up to him. God preferred Esau's offerings over Cain's and Cain just couldn't let it go. He seethed in anger. God noticed and sat down with Cain and told him to be careful; and that he had the capacity to control his anger and avoid bloodshed. But Cain didn't listen. Instead, he took his brother Esau out to the fields and murdered him.

And God was horrified. God foresaw an impending cycle of violence, a truth that you and I know too well in the world around us. God knew that violence begets violence and God refused to endorse that philosophy. Cain suffered the consequences, yes; he was banished from the land as the very ground cried out in agony in disgust of the violent violation of creation. But Cain was nevertheless shown mercy. God marked Cain to protect him. God marked Cain to break the cycle of violence.

Fast forward a few generations and we're introduced to a grandchild of Cain by the name of Lamech and Lamech has no interest in God's policy of nonviolence. Instead, he brags and boasts about his capacity for vengeance. If someone insults him, he'll cut off the other person's arm. If someone slaps him, he'll murder them. Lamech sees God's policy of nonviolence as weakness. Lamech beats his chest and yells that the source of his strength is his capacity for vengeance. This is what Lamech says in Genesis 4:23-24:

*Lamech said to his wives: 'Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.
If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.'*

Does the sound of that voice seem familiar to you? Cause it does to me. It's a voice that we know all too well. It's a voice that echoes from the Oval Office. It's a voice that echoes through the history of this country. It's a voice that, if we are to be brutally honest, lives within you and it lives within me. We all have the capacity and, yes, even the urge to lash out when we are wronged. And I think Jesus knew that in today's passage because Jesus uses that same number, the number 77 that Lamech uses to describe the number of times that he'll lash out in vengeance.

You see, you gotta love Peter because Peter asks the question that everyone wants to ask but is too scared to ask. Peter asks how many times he should forgive someone and Jesus responds with not seven but 77 times. Jesus knows that Peter is well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures and knows the story of Lamech. Furthermore, the author of the Gospel of Matthew is writing to a predominately Jewish audience so they know that the readers will know the story of Lamech as well.

In citing the number 77, Jesus is trying to undo the vengeance of Lamech. In citing the number 77, Jesus is trying to break the cycle of vengeance and establish forgiveness as the very stuff of the Kingdom of Heaven, a lifestyle that bears within it the capacity to makes us more righteous instead of more hateful. And to make his point, as he does often, Jesus tells a parable.

You see, there's this servant who owes an absurdly large amount of money to his king. Without going too much into specifics, let's just say that the amount of money he owed was a debt that couldn't possibly be paid off in one lifetime, or even a hundred lifetimes, or even a thousand lifetimes! In fact, some biblical scholars estimate that 10,000 talents was more money than was even in circulation in the entire country at that time! Needless to say, this servant has been forgiven a debt that is unimaginatively burdensome. This servant (not to mention his family as well!) has been reconciled to the community and freed of his debt.

The cycle has been broken. A new alternative has been presented. It's just like when God sat down with Cain to talk to him before he killed his brother. God said to Cain, "I see what you're thinking and I'm here to tell you that there is another way to live; a different kind of living that doesn't resort to violence." But instead of accepting God's peaceful alternative, Cain rejects it and chooses the easier path, the one that ends in blood. So too does his offspring, Lamech, several generations later.

And, sadly, so too does the servant in today's parable. Instead of promoting this new reality of forgiveness, the servant finds someone who owes him a pitifully small amount of money compared to the amount he was just forgiven and grabs him by the throat to demand the immediate repayment. When the man cannot pay his debt, he has him thrown into jail.

The story does not have a happy ending for anyone. The king is understandably enraged. He attempted to break the cycle and forgave the servant his debt. And what did he do with that forgiveness? He spat it out and continued the very cycle it was intended to disrupt. The servant is tortured and thrown into jail for the rest of his life and we are left with these uneasy words: So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

And thus, the parable leaves us with this inarguable truth: Jesus takes forgiveness deadly seriously and, therefore, those of us who claim to be his followers must do so as well.

And so, as Jesus tells us, we must forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times. You know, I think the reason Jesus tells us that we must forgive so much is because Jesus understood that forgiveness takes *practice*. In my experience, forgiveness is not just some light switch that we can magically flick on at our convenience. No, forgiveness is something that must be built within us. Forgiveness is something that must be *trained* within us just like a runner training for a marathon.

A few weeks ago, while Tricia, Hazel Grace, and I were at the beach, I decided to read John Lewis' memoir, *Walking in the Wind*. In it, he recounts his experiences leading the civil rights movement back in the 1960's. John Lewis was a leader in what was called SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Together, they organized lunch counter sit-ins in Nashville and elsewhere, participated in the Freedom Rides, and tirelessly marched, demonstrated, and registered black folks to vote. They organized relentlessly and forced the federal government to enforce the voting laws that the southern local jurisdictions refused to obey.

But what struck me the most in John Lewis' memoir were his recollections of the intentionality with which they prepared and trained themselves to react nonviolently when violence reared its ugly head. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Council held countless training sessions across the south and role-played scenarios, training the protestors to resist violence.

Hear what John Lewis had to say about these training sessions:

One method of practicing this approach, when faced with a hateful, angry, aggressive, even despicable person, is to imagine that person - actually visualize him or her - as an infant, as a baby. If you can see this full-grown attacker who faces you as the pure, innocent child that he or she once was - that we all once were - it is not hard to find compassion in your heart. It is not hard to find forgiveness. And this...is at the essence of the nonviolent way of life - the capacity to forgive. When you can truly understand and feel, even as a person is cursing you to your face, even as he is spitting on you, or pushing a lit cigarette into your neck, or beating you with a truncheon - if you can understand and feel even in the midst of those critical and often physically painful moments that your attacker is as much a victim as you are, that he is a victim of the forces that have shaped and fed his anger and fury, then you are well on your way to the nonviolent life.

And it is a way of life. This is not simply a technique or a tactic or a strategy or a tool to be pulled out when needed. It is not something you turn on or off like a faucet. This sense of love, this sense of peace, the capacity for compassion, is something you carry inside yourself every waking minute of the day. It shapes your response to a curt cashier in the grocery store or to a driver cutting you off in traffic just as surely as it keeps you from striking back at a state trooper who might be kicking you in the ribs because you dared to march in protest against an oppressive government.

That kind of radical forgiveness is a *subversive* power that can, and does, and will change the world and help us live into our calling to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Now here I must insert a few critical pastoral caveats.

First of all, a theology of radical forgiveness must *never* be used to enable and support cycles of abuse. Any theology that is used to keep victims in abusive relationships - whether that abuse is physical, emotional, sexual, or even spiritual - is wrong. Full stop. That's most certainly *not* what Jesus is referring to in today's passage.

Secondly, to practice radical forgiveness does *not* mean that consequences don't matter. If I wrong another human being and they forgive me, their forgiveness does not erase the harmful consequences of my wrongdoing. If we are to truly receive forgiveness in the spirit in which it is given, then we must actively work to change the behavior that made that forgiveness necessary in the first place. Which leads me to my third pastoral caveat...

Finally, to practice radical forgiveness does *not* mean that we fail to hold one another accountable for our actions. Radical forgiveness does not mean that we fail to hold our leaders accountable, whether that leader is the President of the United States or a pastor like me. Passages such as today's text have been used far too many times to dismiss demonstrated patterns of abusive, unjust, and cruel behavior. Simply put, to use today's passage as some magical "get out of jail free" card for ourselves or someone else is theological heresy.

Now that we've demonstrated how today's passage should *not* be used, I'll finish my sermon by suggesting how it *should* be used.

The forgiveness that Jesus is talking about in today's passage is about interrupting the vicious cycles of vengeance we see all around us. It's about accepting an alternative way of living, a nonviolent way of life, and sharing it with others. It's about going against the flow and that takes courage, intentionality, and faithfulness.

Tomorrow evening, I'm going to be doing a live interview on Facebook with my friend and colleague, Tom Junod, whose friendship with Fred Rogers was the inspiration for the recent movie starring Tom Hanks as Mr. Rogers. As I've been preparing for this interview, I've been doing a lot of research on the life of Fred Rogers.

What first compelled Mr. Rogers to create his own television show was because he was so dismayed, discouraged, and disgusted with the children's television shows of that time. He found them to be loud, crude, and profane. So he decided to provide a very countercultural alternative. He decided to step into that loud, crude space and preach his message to children with quiet, dignity, respect, and kindness. He bravely stepped into the arena and instead of adding to the noise and hatred and crudeness, his gentle voice and kind demeanor expressed love in a powerful way.

So, dear friends, if you are dismayed, discouraged, and disgusted by what you see around you, then do your part to break the cycle. Practice radical forgiveness. Practice it with me over and over and over and over and over again. And then, bit by bit, we might just heal the wounds of this world in Jesus' name. Together, you and I can compose a different version of today's parable - one where we replace cycles of vengeance with cycles of persevering peace.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**