

Proper 19, Year A

Sermon

Sunday, September 17, 2023

## **Lord... how often should I forgive?**

Good morning, St. Dustan's!

See this stone?

Did everyone receive a stone?

Who needs a stone?

Here are your instructions:

For the remainder of my sermon, I would like for you to place the stone in your non-dominant hand. If your right-handed, place it in your left hand. If your left-handed, place the stone in your right hand. If your ambidextrous, then you have free choice.

Now, lift your arm just a little. Then try to hold it there.

I'll give further instructions, in a few moments. I promise I won't forget.

Hold your stone right there until further notice.

Our gospel reading today has us thinking about something we all need to think about yet so often fail to consider... forgiving.

Forgiveness. Such a loaded word.

I truly love the intersection of all lectionary readings for today.

Today's gospel passage opens with Peter's mind churning from our reading last week on the discussion of conflicts and conflict resolutions. Peter asks a very practical question.

In light of Jesus' words on repairing relationships with someone who has hurts you, Peter asks this question:

How many times should a person extend forgiveness?

Thinking he was being somewhat generous Peter suggests to Jesus the number of '7 times'.

The Talmud which was Law Review for that day, mandated that a person be forgiven only **three** times.

Certain numbers in the Bible have symbolic meaning.

Seven, for example. could represent completeness and perfection, as seen in the 7 days of creation with the ultimate day being the Sabbath.

It's understandable why Peter would choose the number 7.

Jesus comes back with NOPE.

In verse 22 "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times or some versions say "seventy times seven."

Jesus' numerical response is not to be taken literally.

This is a wonderful example of the way numbers can have an **emotional value** in Judaism as much as a **numerical value** as we will see a little later on in this story.

A good paraphrase of Jesus "numerical answer". might be, "More times than you can possibly imagine."

Let's reset the stage:

Peter asks, "How often should I forgive?"

With the answer, "More times than you can possibly imagine."

Jesus makes sure that a lesson on forgiveness is not to be missed.

Jesus provides a parable to make his point.

Set in the framework of the kingdom of heaven, v. 23.

Jesus wants his listeners, then as well as now, not to miss the context.

He begins his story,

"A servant owed an impossible large amount to a king.

ten thousand talents are equal to sixty million days' worth of wages.

Again, the number 'ten thousand talents' has **an emotional value**.

Certainly, it would be humanly impossible for such a debt to ever be repaid.

It is a bigger debt than Peter could possibly imagine.

Within the Greco-Roman world, a man and his wife and children, the entire family, could be sold into slavery to repay the debt.

This servant begs the king for more time to pay the insurmountable debt.

Imagine working for sixty zillion days. The gracious King, saw the hopelessness of the situation.

Then

He does the unimaginable: the king decides to cancel the entire debt. The servant is no longer bound.

The king has exercised his privilege and used his authority to forgive the servant.

How wonderful if the story ended there with a fabulous ending on forgiveness.

But the story does not end there. We get to hear the rest of the story...

Once the servant was set free, the servant finds one of his fellow servants who owes him a relatively small debt of one hundred days' work. The first servant then violently attacks the man and demands to be repaid immediately. This first servant inflicts on his fellow servant the punishment on which he had been threatened with.

What happens? That ungrateful servant has the man thrown into prison.

Peter, who like us, is unaware of the weight of the consequences of his choices.

How typical of Jesus to leave the story rather open-ended.

It allows Peter, and us, the freedom to make the realization and figure out who we represent in the story: the forgiving King or the unforgiving servant.

Still holding the stone? Just checking.

In our Old Testament reading, we read the story of Joseph who was tragically wronged by his own brothers yet Joseph chooses to forgive them. Joseph throughout his time of suffering, and he knew suffering, was able to have an incredible perspective. Genesis 50: 20 says,

"Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

But what about us?

How do we navigate forgiveness?

I've been reading, *The Book of Forgiveness* by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter. They know a thing or two about forgiveness.

In order to recognize what forgiveness is,  
let's understand what forgiveness **is NOT**:

**Forgiveness is not easy;**

it requires hard work and a consistent willingness.

**Forgiveness does not mean forgetting.** It requires a fearless remembering of the hurt.

It does not mean denying the pain or the harm that was done  
or pretending the harm did not happen or was as bad as it really was.

**Forgiveness is not quick.** It can take several journeys through the cycles of remembering and grief before one can truly forgive and be free.

Tutu offers a Fourfold path to Forgiveness.

**1.-Telling the story:**

Speak the truth, start with the facts, tell your story to a trusted person. Accept that whatever has happened cannot be changed or undone.

**2. Name the hurt**

-try to identify the feelings within the facts...

Forgiving requires giving voice and naming the pain.

Find someone who will listen and not try to fix your feelings.

Then move forward when you are ready.

**3. Grant forgiveness-**

Forgiveness is a choice.

Forgiving is how we move from being the victim to becoming the hero in our own story.

**4. Renew or release the relationship**

-Reconciliation is the preference unless the question of safety is involved.

By renewing or releasing a relationship, you free yourself from trauma.

Remember this: **Forgiving yourself is just as important as forgiving others.**

We become imprisoned in the past when we do not forgive **ourselves** for past mistakes.

Our Psalmist today teaches us,

God forgives all your sins

<sup>12</sup>As far as the east is from the west,

so far has he removed our sins from us.

**Jesus wants us to know the importance of forgiveness.**

Forgiveness can be extremely healthy.

It heals families and communities. We are all interconnected and live in community.

In forgiveness, we find a release from anger and resentment.

It offers us freedom from the past.

**Forgiveness is a GIFT we give to ourselves.**

Okay, back to this stone:

Put your arm down, (keep your stone as a reminder or put it back in the basket)

What did you notice about holding the stone?

Was holding to it useful? Annoying? Uncomfortable?

It makes life difficult. Imagine trying to type or text, grab a cup of coffee holding a stone in your hand. It's doable but awkward and cumbersome.

Holding this stone is like holding onto an unforgiven hurt.

It's always there, reminding you of a past pain. It's difficult to maneuver holding onto it.

Holding this stone is like holding onto unforgiveness.

Just as you release this stone,

I pray you will get to a point where you may release, with God's help,  
any unforgiveness you may have....

Amen