

Sermon – “Seventy Seven Times”

Sunday, September 14, 2014

Scripture Readings – Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

Hannah Dreitcer

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading, Romans chapter 14, verses 1 through 13, continues with Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. Though Paul has never visited this church, he knows that it, like every church, is made up of a diverse group of people with many different ideas about the best way to worship God. These difference, he tells them, don’t need to divide them. What matters instead is that every person is living for God, even if that looks different for each individual. Paul speaks to this ancient church and to our church today about living together in respect and love as the members of the body of Christ. Hear now the word of God.

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. ² One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. ⁴ Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. ⁵ One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶ Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. ⁸ If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister^[a]? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. ¹¹ It is written: “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.’”^[b] ¹² So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. ¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

Amen.

Our second scripture reading, found in Matthew, chapter 18, verses 21 through 35, contains one of Jesus’ most famous teachings on forgiveness. When Peter asks how many times he should forgive someone who has wronged him, Jesus offers a seemingly unrealistic answer: Every time. Jesus goes on to tell a parable about the kingdom of heaven and how forgiveness is a crucial part of God’s relationship with us and our relationship with one, challenging his listeners past and present to find new ways of living into God’s love. Hear now what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church^[a] sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven^[b] times. ²³ “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents^[c] was brought to him; ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii;^[d] and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him

into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ 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. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister^{esl} from your heart.'

This is the Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon: Seventy Seven Times

The text: "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." Romans 14:11

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, in countless ways and in countless moments you have canceled our debts and freed us into new life. Strengthen and empower us to have the courage to do the same for those around us. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Forgiveness is an idea that gets tossed around pretty lightly, but the longer I've been sitting with it the past week, the more I've come to appreciate that it is in fact a heavy concept.

Forgiveness is the backbone of our religion, and so has become a pillar of Western morality. Just as we are taught as children to apologize when we've wronged someone, we're taught to forgive when we've been wronged.

In church every week we hear the declaration of the good news that God has forgiven us, and every week we together pray that we might be able to forgive others.

We know that forgiveness is important, and we know that forgiveness is a powerful act.

But forgiveness is that not easy to talk about, because forgiveness is only needed where there is injury, pain that we have either suffered or caused.

In South Africa, after apartheid ended, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission saw forgiveness as a path to a new way of being. Working for the healing of the country, the TRC provided a place in which stories of wrongdoing could be told and forgiveness could be offered. And amazing work was done, but forgiveness is heavy, and powerful, and happens in God's time, not to the timeline of a committee. And many people suffered further hurt when they were judged for not offering a forgiveness they could not yet give, and the country is still paralyzed by its many wounds.

Forgiveness is powerful, and happens in God's time, and is deeply personal. And so, instead of offering a story to you, I invite you to consider a time of forgiveness in your own life, a time when you offered forgiveness, or were forgiven in turn.

And I expect Peter is thinking about his own stories when he comes to Jesus to ask about how often he should forgive others. Now, I've done my fair share of making fun of Peter for his seemingly pretentious question: Look at me! Look how willing I am to forgive someone! Up to seven times!

But seven times is a lot. If one person has hurt us seven times, that can feel endless.

And Jesus tells Peter that forgiveness is in fact endless—that seven times is not enough, but rather that forgiveness must be offered seventy seven times, a number used in that era to indicate a countless amount.

And Jesus, to no one's surprise, tells a parable.

A servant owes a king nearly twenty years' worth of his wages, an insurmountable debt, and when the debt is called in and he and his family are to be sold to meet it, he begs for time, and patience.

Instead, he is met with overwhelming mercy. The king cancels the debt entirely. This is radical, this is overwhelming: the king forgives the debt, freeing this man and his family from a lifetime of slavery and generations of poverty.

This is a story about forgiveness, but this is also a story about power. The king has great power; his debtor is nothing but a servant; the king can use his power and authority as he chooses—no one will fight him or force him to change his mind.

And how does he use this power? To empower another: to set a man and his family free from crippling debt and give them their futures, futures that now have 77 times more opportunities than they did before.

And this newly empowered man goes out into the world—but we know too well that power can be abused.

This newly empowered man goes out into the world and seizes his own debtor. Full of power he may never have been before, he ignores the pleas of his debtor, misuses his power, and throws this other man into jail. He deprives this other man of his freedom, and he binds and limits the future of this man's family, now husband-less and father-less in a time when that meant complete ruin.

But we get the sense that justice is served, for the king, hearing of this, has the servant arrested and thrown into prison himself, and tortured until he pays off the debt that once was canceled; an impossible task, for how can either man ever pay off his debt in prison?

And while it might be satisfying to our sense of fairness, that's a pretty grim ending for a story that began with such a radical and overwhelming action of forgiveness.

Even more grim is that Jesus tells us that we, too, will be so treated if we fail to forgive others, a statement traditionally understood to mean that a failure to forgive will send us one day to hell. But we know that there doesn't need to be a literal hell for souls to be tortured, and that such torment can happen throughout this life.

When the servant refused to forgive, he bound his debtor and took away his power, an action that resulted in his own binding. Forgiveness is a kind of power, one that empowers and frees both the forgiven and the forgiver. And so to refuse to forgive removes power and binds both individuals, locking everyone into their own impossible-to-escape prisons, for no debt can be met in such a place.

In this parable, Jesus offers us a vision first of what happens when forgiveness is offered, and next what happens when judgment is passed instead.

And fortunately, our reading from Romans is all about the passing of judgment.

Paul hasn't met the church in Rome, yet, but clearly he has heard about some arguments they've been having. The church appears divided about dietary restrictions and festival days, issues that continued to cause division right through the Reformation and beyond. And it feels pretty easy to side with Paul's exasperation here—what does it matter who eats what? And I might be biased, but I sure hope one can be both vegetarian and Christian.

But there are and always have been 77 reasons for Christians to argue.

I've always loved Paul for his attention to minutia—and he is right in the nitty gritty of church life here. Because Paul knows that as unimportant as these might seem, these issues matter deeply to people. These are not concerns that can be simply shrugged off.

And so Paul casts this as important. Not important as in profound theological issues—no, these debates are important because they threaten the unity of the body of the Christ, and because this passing of judgment binds the community into paralyzing division.

We each belong to God, Paul writes. All of us—we live and die for God, and we belong to God. No matter how we worship, or when, or in what way—what is important is that we worship, that we sing our praises to God.

And passing judgment disempowers, and binds. Judging our sisters and brothers in Christ binds their tongues and keeps them from offering praise to God, and what good does that do anyone? The body of Christ is paralyzed when its members turn on each other, accusing and limiting, fighting over the spiritual rightness of one way of worshiping over another.

We each belong to God, fully and completely, and passing judgments on each other limits our power and freedom to live as God's children. It is only when the judgments cease that God's work can happen as it happens here in this church: that schoolchildren in need can be fed and tutored, that people experiencing homelessness can be sheltered and supported, that many hands can come together in fellowship to knit hats for infants, or many voices can join together and be lifted up in praise to God.

And so Paul encourages that church in Rome and every church since not to pass judgment on each other, and not to put stumbling blocks in each other's paths, but to live as if we are already in God's kingdom, where all are known and treated as God's own.

And Jesus tells us that God's kingdom is where forgiveness is offered instead of judgments. That the kingdom of heaven is like a community in which debts are forgiven seventy seven times, where each person is empowered and freed to go and live their lives with seventy seven opportunities to extend that power and freedom to their own debtors.

And we find that kingdom here at this table. Here we see and touch and taste the forgiveness that is offered to us together with our sisters and brothers in Christ. Here we receive the nourishment and the strength to go out and be courageous enough to forgive instead of judge, to free instead of bind, and thus to be freed ourselves.

Whether we are new to this table, or whether we have come to this table seventy seven times, we are always welcome. God puts no stumbling blocks on our way here, and so we must work always to make sure that we keep from putting stumbling blocks before anyone else. Forgiveness is hard; forgiveness is personal; forgiveness does not happen to anyone's timeline but God's—but forgiveness frees both forgiven and forgiver, and grants both the power to live for God.

Think again of your own story of forgiveness. This is what God's kingdom is like: a place where all debts are forgiven and no judgment is passed, where people empower and free each other to live as God's own, and where a table is set and a meal is prepared to which all have been invited.

Thanks be to God.