

Reflection for September 13, 2020

The Mathematics of Forgiveness

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Yet evil does not—cannot—undermine or overcome the love of God.

God forgives, and calls all of us to confess our fears and failings with honesty and humility.

The peace of the Lord be with you always.

Let us pray:

God of the mountains and the seas, of dry land and living waters, may we always look for you where your Spirit leads us, in truth. May we always notice you where hope does not disappoint us, because we know that your love has been poured over all. Amen.

The larger context of our Gospel passage (Matthew 18:21-35), which includes all of chapter 18, deals with community and the quality of relationships that promote a healthy one. The foundation of Jesus' understanding is that we are all connected. These connections can be positive or negative, life-giving and affirming, or toxic and oppressive. Relationships, and therefore community, are impacted by our ability or inability to forgive. Perhaps this is one of the most important ways the people of God witness to the world. We model before others not only how to treat others, but how we handle the mistreatment of others. We model forgiveness or not. As Brian Erickson observes, "Peter is always direct with his words."

Having heard the instructions on how Christians are to deal with conflict, he now wants a number. He knows that Jesus will set the number high, probably ridiculously high; so Peter shoots even higher. Not once, not twice, not thrice, but seven times. When can I write this person off? When we step away from Scripture and imagine someone wronging us seven times, Peter's formula sounds pretty ambitious.

By countering the seemingly generous "seven times" that Peter proposes with "seventy-seven," Jesus may well be indirectly referencing, and directly reversing, the revenge cycle briefly described in the story of Lamech (Genesis 4:23-24). Lamech boasts to his family, "If someone wrongs me, I will repay them, not just in kind, but seventy-seven times over." Forgiveness, as Jesus presents it here, can be understood as the radical, self-sacrificing opposite of—and necessary alternative to—revenge. The problem with counting how many times we forgive is that we're not really practicing grace; we're just extending our patience. Keeping count of wrongs is a means of unforgiveness, for the past is never really washed away; it's just relegated to the archives. When we choose to forgive, we have to be ready intentionally to stop rehearsing and rehashing that moment of pain. A lot of times folks will speak forgiveness, but whenever anything else happens in the relationship, those old wounds get opened up all over again. When we choose to forgive others, we have to take the risk of restoring the relationship back to where it was before we were hurt. It may not ever grow beyond that, but we have to be willing to get back to where we started. That means taking the risk of being hurt all over again. You have no guarantees this will not happen again. We have to risk that, just as God has taken that risk with us.

It seems that one's perspective greatly affects one's willingness to forgive. As Raquel Lettsome suggests, "Perhaps, like Peter, the issue for us is not whether or not we should forgive, but the limits to our

forgiveness. In short, we want to know under what circumstances we can withhold forgiveness. Jesus puts how much we forgive others in relation to how we have been forgiven. Peter's question provides opportunity for personal reflection. It causes us to consider what limits we put on whom and how often we forgive. Is it the number of fouls they commit? The type of foul? Who they are? Whom they have fouled? In similar fashion, the fate of the unforgiving slave provides an additional opportunity. It causes us to consider limits we want placed on receiving forgiveness ourselves. Is it the number of fouls we commit? The type of foul? Who we are? Whom we have fouled?

Why is it so important that we forgive and why do so many of us find it so difficult to forgive? Forgiveness is difficult and complex. Being people of forgiveness means we are not waiting until someone earns our forgiveness. That is as impossible as our trying to earn the love of God, and it is just as unfaithful. There will sometimes be consequences. We should not forgive serious wrongs when we don't yet believe there has been true repentance, but once we know there has been repentance, we have to let go of those obstacles that keep us distant from the person who has hurt us.

Forgiveness can involve issues of justice and reparations and of course deep-seated anger and the wish for revenge. The Dalai Lama states that "Forgiveness is not a question of forgetting the wrong done; if you've forgotten what was done, there is nothing to forgive." Forgiveness involves refusing to allow yourself to give in to anger and the desire for revenge. This is why forgiveness ultimately brings peace.

When the Second World War broke out, Ralph MacLean chose to escape his troubled life on the Magdalen Islands in eastern Canada and volunteer to serve his country overseas. Meanwhile, in Vancouver, Mitsue Sakamoto saw her family and her stable community torn apart after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Ralph was captured by the

Japanese army and would spend the war in prison camps, enduring pestilence, beatings, and starvation. Back in Canada, Mitsue and her family were expelled from their home by the government and forced to spend years eking out an existence in rural Alberta, working other people's land for \$1 a day. By the end of the war, Ralph emerged broken but a survivor. Mitsue, worn down by years of back-breaking labour, had to start all over again in Medicine Hat, Alberta. A generation later, at a high school dance, Ralph's daughter and Mitsue's son fell in love. Although the war had threatened to erase Ralph's and Mitsue's humanity, these two brave individuals somehow surmounted enormous transgressions and learned to forgive. This incredible story is captured by their grandson, Mark Sakamoto, in his award winning book, *Forgiveness: A Gift from my Grandparents*.

Forgiveness does not flow *to* us if it does not flow *through* us. In God's economy, forgiveness begets more forgiveness, compassion changes us and charges us with being compassionate.

Let us pray:

For the blessing of this and all our days, we thank you, Gracious God. Accept, we pray, not just our offerings of money, but also our lives freely offered in gratitude for all you have done for us. Bless and use all that we offer and wherever you might take us. Amen.

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