

Forgiving One Another

So many of Jesus' parables and teachings are in response to specific questions people asked him. One man came up to Jesus and asked him "Who is my neighbor" and Jesus answered with a story we call "The Good Samaritan." And in the telling of that story, as Jesus so often did, he turned people's questions around on them. At the end of the story Jesus asks a very different question, a much better question, "Which one was a neighbor?"

On another occasion a crowd had gathered to hear Jesus and a group of Pharisees stood nearby muttering about Jesus. They didn't ask a question but their muttering certainly implied one. Why does Jesus mix with sinners? So Jesus tells another story, a kind of first century version of "Lost." But instead of a lost plane and a lost island Jesus tells parables of the lost and found, a lost coin, a lost sheep and a lost boy. That last story we call the Prodigal Son. Timothy Keller tells us that Jesus more likely would have titled his story, The Prodigal God, a God who loves us so much and is so ready to forgive that he is willing to appear shamefully wasteful with his love for sinners who do not deserve it.

Today we look at another of Jesus's parabolic answers to a question, Peter's question. "Lord, how many times do I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times? Peter's willingness to forgive

seven times would have seemed magnanimous to those listening. The law only required 3 times. Jesus' answer surely startled Peter. He was probably looking for a spiritual pat on the back. Instead he took one on the chin! Would we have fared any better. Jesus answers, "Not seven times, but seventy seven times." "What! Seventy-seven times. Are you crazy?" Actually Jesus' answer was probably even crazier than the New International Version suggests. Many scholars think what Jesus actually said was seventy times seven which of course would be 490!

Peter could hardly believe his ears. "Lord, how can I keep count?" "You can't Peter." "Then when will I know I can stop?" "You won't Peter." That's the point isn't it? If you're counting its not forgiveness. How different from what the Jews were accustomed to. Their law demanded "an eye for an eye." They understood getting even. Mahatma Ghandi once said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." That's not quite fair to the Jews however. The Jewish law actually encouraged restraint, with the novel suggestion that the punishment should fit the crime, "an eye for an eye." If I steal your cow, what is fair is to give you a cow back in return. In the typical ancient society, if I steal your cow, you kill me, my wife, my family, burn my house and take my cow, and everything else! A bit more than just getting even!

But even in the Jews' more enlightened system of justice, one's motivation is still the principle of getting even. We all feel we have the right to get even, the right to square things up. However, the problem with getting even is, it's really hard to keep the books. The equation for justice is complicated and few of us are very good at legal calculus. We demonstrate our flawed judgment often. When we watch basketball and a player on our team is fouled it is outrageous, uncalled for, bad sportsmanship. To make things right the opposing player should be tossed out of the game. When a foul is called on a player from our team, What?! There was no foul! If there was it was understandable; he was just getting even! When someone cuts in front of me in traffic it is a case of reckless driving. The guy should lose his license. If I cut back in front of him, well, its justified, I'm just getting even. If a coke machine takes my money and no can of coke appears, I'm agitated. That machine stole my money; it ripped me off. If one the other hand the machine not only gives me a can of coke but also gives me more change than it should have. Well, that's just making up for previous times when it didn't. Now we're even.

This getting even stuff starts young. We see it in our children's arguments. "Is so", "Is not", "Is so, Is not." "Don't hit me." "You hit me first." "No I didn't." "Yes you did." One mother ran into the bedroom

when she heard her 5 year old boy scream. She found his two-year-old sister pulling his hair. She gently released the little girl's grip and said comfortingly to her boy, "There, there. She didn't mean it. Your sister doesn't know that hurts." Mom barely was out of the room when she heard the little girl scream. Rushing back in, she said, "What happened!?" The boy explained. "She knows now!"

Living by the principle of getting even destroys relationships. It only maintains a sense of hostility between people. We watch friendships, marriages, business relationships, political parties, nations destroyed as people are obsessed with getting even. The "getting even" principle gives us a perverted sense of justification for behavior that is selfish and hurtful to others. "I'm just getting even." "She had it coming." But here's the problem. You can't forgive someone when you're getting even with him. In fact, the literal meaning of "forgive" is to give away, to let go, in other words, to give up getting even. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, Jesus says don't get even, he says turn the other cheek. If a soldier exploits you and makes you carry his armor for a mile, Jesus says don't get even, carry it for two miles. If someone sues you for your shirt, Jesus says don't get even, give him your coat also. "Jesus, that's just crazy. What kind of

society could function like that?” Only a revolutionary one with revolutionary people.

Forgiveness is and always has been a radical idea and a powerful one. Forgiving people, really forgiving them has the power to change people, really change them. I love the story of Betty Elliot and Rachel Saint. In 1955 five missionary families moved to Ecuador to work with the Auca Indians. After several months of dropping supplies by plane to the Indians to express their desire to help them, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming and Roger Youderian landed their little Cessna plane in the jungle to finally meet with the Indians face to face. Within five days all five missionaries were murdered by the Indians they were trying to convert.

The widows and children returned to their homes in stunned grief and sorrow. Who could blame them if they harbored bitterness and anger in their heart toward these savages? Who could blame them if they wanted to some how get even with them? But they had no desire for vengeance, quite the opposite. Jim Elliot’s widow Betty and Nate Saint’s sister Rachel returned to Ecuador a few years later and resumed their missionary work with this same tribe. They not only made contact with them, they began to live in their villages along side them. Betty raised her daughter Valerie. Nate

Saint's two children, Kathy and Steve, frequently visited their aunt and spent summers there. They got to know the tribe well!

Then one day something amazing happened. Something profoundly more satisfying than "getting even" happened. Nate Saint's children, Kathy and Steve were baptized by two Auca Indians they had become close to, Kimo and Dyuwi, who had been converted to Christ and were becoming spiritual leaders for the tribe. Here's the really amazing part of the story. These two Auca Indians were among the group of men who killed Steve's father. Nothing is more powerful, nothing is more revolutionary, nothing is more transformational, than forgiveness. By the way, this amazing story has been made into a very fine film, "The End of the Spear." Yes, it is one of the films you have to see to get to heaven!

Forgiveness can change the destiny of a person, a family, a nation, a world. It changed the Elliots and the Saints. It changed the Auca Indians. It changed Kimo and Dyumi. Betty and Rachel could have lived their lives wanting to get even. Instead they wanted only to forgive. Their story was not unlike the story of another young preacher who was also preaching to a lost tribe, a tribe that also killed him. As he lay dying from their brutal attack, he didn't want to get even with his killers. Instead he prayed for his killers, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." It was an amazing

testimony of mercy and it changed the life of one of the tribesmen who stood their watching that day. The preacher's name was Stephen. The tribesman's name was Saul, better known by the name of Paul, the apostle. Forgiveness; it's a beautiful thing.

So how can we escape the prison of "getting even" and start forgiving? How many times must we forgive another? Jesus tells a story. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denari. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in.

‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

It's a simple story. The points are painfully clear. The first servant is us. The master is God. We are the ones who owe the enormous debt. One source I read says, “the talent in this parable was worth about 6,000 denarii so that the first servant’s debt is 600,000 times as large as the second servant’s. A denarius was a day's wages; 10,000 talents would be about 200,000 years' wages. To give you another idea of just how large the first servant’s debt of 10,000 talents was, the combined annual tribute of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea around this time was only 600 talents, this servant’s debt was 10,000! But the contrast the two debts Jesus is making is even more extreme than this. The largest Greek number is ten thousand, a myriad. And a talent is the largest unit of currency. So 10,000 talents was literally the largest number possible to describe a debt. So what is Jesus’ point? A simple one I think. Our debt to God is beyond anything we could possibly measure. That's a hard concept for us to grasp because we don’t like to think

of our sinfulness, our selfishness as all that bad. But if we are to believe the Word of God we must accept some hard truths, like the truth Peter tells us when he asks us to consider what the price of our salvation is. *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect (1 Peter 1:18-19).* Do we believe what we so often sing?

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.” “Nothing in my hand I bring: simply to thy cross I cling. Naked, come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace; vile, to the fountain fly: wash me Savior, or I die.” “What can wash away my sin? Nothing, but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing, but the blood of Jesus. O precious is the flow that makes me white as snow. No other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

In this story God is the king. He is within his rights to condemn us. Yet he is moved by our cry and he forgives us our debt with a million dollar mercy. Who is the other servant? Anyone who has wronged us, anyone we need to forgive. It may be a child who has not appreciated our sacrifices for them. It may be a parent who has made no sacrifices for us. It may be a spouse who has rejected us. It may be an enemy who has violated us.

Whoever it is, whatever their wrong may be, Jesus says, in comparison to our own indescribable debt to God, anyone's debt to us is a mere pittance.

The choice for the servant is the same for us. We can respond to million dollar mercy or we can demand our own two bit justice. Jesus says this servant's choice will greatly affect his eternal fate. So will our choice. Well, that's the parable. Simple enough. Painfully clear. This servant had an unbelievable choice. In response to his own forgiveness, he could have forgiven others. Instead he chose to get even. How could he make such a choice? Good question. It is the very questions Jesus is asking Peter (and us). "Lord, how many times must I forgive another?" "Peter, how can you even ask?"

The scriptures are clear. *Forgive others as Christ has forgiven us. Judge not that ye be not judged. Forgive our debts even as we forgive our debtors. And, This is how my father will treat you, unless you forgive.*

A judge once visited a prisoner serving a life term. He had influenced the governor to grant a pardon for the man. He had the pardon in his pocket. He said to him, "If you were to be given your freedom, what would you do?" The man vindictively replied, "I would go and shoot the judge that sentenced me, the lawyer that prosecuted me, and the witnesses that testified against me." The judge said nothing to the man about the pardon. He went out of the

prison with the pardon still in his pocket and the prisoner still in his prison.

The same choice faces us, a pardon or a prison; forgive or get even.

If we are to be a one-anothering people God desires his Church to be, we must learn how to forgive one another, to forgive our brothers and sisters, to forgive our neighbors, to forgive even our enemies. We must give up the quest to be moral mathematicians, constantly calculating the too complicated calculus of justice. Instead Christ invites us to embrace a much simpler equation, the one he himself lived by. “Father, forgive them they know not what they do.”