

The 15th Sun after Pentecost, Proper 19 "Human & Divine Forgiveness"

Ex 14:19-31; Rom. 14:1-12; Matt 18:21-35, Ps 114

You just gotta love Peter. He tries so hard, but bless his little "pea-pickin' heart" he just keeps missing the mark. Peter is so proud of himself; he thinks he understands what Jesus has been saying about "Forgiveness." It seems Peter thinks he's impressing Jesus by his willingness to forgive a magnanimous seven times. And while it may be easy to laugh at foolish Peter, we need to remember that: "he is us!" The reality is that he is every one of us. Jesus chastises Peter by saying, "Look Peter, if you are still "counting," then you still don't understand what forgiveness is all about; because true forgiveness has no limit."

Look, the only reason we "love" is *because* God loved us first. [1 Jn 4.19]. Likewise, we forgive *because* God first forgave us...and then he bids us to follow him and do as he did. So the reality is that the forgiveness we have toward others is really the extension of what Jesus has given us. Like the servant in today's parable, we owe a debt to God that we can never repay. All we can do is share God's generosity with others. We do that by "*forgiving the trespasses of others, just as God has forgiven our own trespasses.*" [Mt 6.14]

Like the Unforgiving Servant in today's parable, all Jesus asks of us is to reciprocate the forgiveness that God has already given to us. When we harbor un-forgiveness in our hearts, when we harbor resentment, anger, judgment, a desire for vengeance and retaliation, then we have no room for the freedom and joy that Christ calls for us to live into. Otherwise, we cannot begin to understand God or our relationship with God.

Forgiveness is not an intellectual exercise and it's far more than just "dusting ourselves off, shaking hands, and walking away." Real forgiveness can still leave real wounds, real scars. Just look at the flayed back of Christ, his bloodied brow, his hands, his feet, his pierced side. Just ask the Amish families I spoke about last week, just ask them about the holes in their lives, where their children used to be.

Forgiveness *is* the purpose and the gift of the Incarnation. Forgiveness and love are the Keys to the Kingdom. As Christians, we believe that we are the Children and Heirs to the Kingdom, we hold those Keys of Forgiveness and Love so that we might be a mercy to the whole world. But how, how do we hold those Keys, how do we use those Keys, in a world with World Wars and 9/11s? Our current World Systems say that someone has to pay: An "eye for an eye...." And yet, Jesus rejects that absolutely.

Unfortunately, judgment, retaliation, and vengeance are the only political ways the world knows. Yet, as Christians, we know that force will never conquer hate. Force may subdue hate for awhile, make it smolder unseen, but force will never conquer hate. We have only to look at the results of the harsh, debilitating judgment forced upon Germany by the Western Allies after World War One. We have only to look at the horrifying consequences to see the *effects* of force, retaliation, and coercion.

Only Forgiveness and Love can conquer hate. And we hold those Keys. We hold them because *we* are the Children of God and we are blessed. We are blessed by God because we are called to be the "Peacemakers." "*Blessed are the Peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.*" [Matt 5.9] And being a Peace-maker is what Jesus calls us to do. Because we believe that "*the merciful will receive mercy; those who mourn will be comforted; the pure in heart shall see God; the persecuted will own the kingdom of heaven...*" [5.4-10] The Beatitudes offer words of Divine power and they should come tumbling out of the heart of every Christian because *they* forge the Ring that holds the Keys to the Kingdom.

Ah, but some might say, if we don't meet power with power, force with force, with retaliation, we will appear weak. We will be seen as vulnerable and "Meek." Yes, and it's the *meek* who will *also* inherit the earth. [5.5]. It may not come in our lifetime. God's time is God's time, but it will happen, and we will eternally be a part of that process.

As Keepers of the Keys to the Kingdom we have a responsibility for how those Keys will be used. We must have faith, and trust that God will protect us. Just like the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, God himself led them. When danger threatened, God moved behind them to shield them. Likewise, God can lead us through stormy seas. And he will protect us, but we have to trust him. We have to believe that God will *not* let our enemies prevail.

So today, we come together to pray for the faith and the wisdom to *be* the Children of God, to use the Keys to the Kingdom to heal a broken world. We pray that God will fill us with the love that casts out fear and a desire for retaliation, and that opens our hearts and minds to listen and to hear the Voice of Truth. As we so desperately partake of *his* unlimited forgiveness, let us pray that *we* can find the heart to offer the same in this broken and hurting world.

"Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord." Ps 114:7a

What are the implications and meanings for *you* in today's readings?

1. As you read the Gospel parable, how would you describe the King and his actions?
 - a. What do you think prompted the King to be so magnanimous in the first place?
 - b. Why do you think the King forgave so enormous a debt?
2. How does the servant whose debt is forgiven, serve as a model for us today?
 - a. What do we learn about 'forgiveness' from this story?
 - b. How does this concept challenge us today? Who in our society needs our forgiveness?
3. Jesus concludes his parable with the warning: "*So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*" [18:35]
 - a. Against whom do you still harbor anger, resentment, or un-forgiveness?
 - b. What are the implications if you, a follower of Christ Jesus, fail to let go and to forgive?
4. In our Old Testament story, the Bible says that the people "*feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and his servant Moses*" [14:31]. Why?

For the Biblical scholars, a more in-depth task:

- Jesus says that this story tells us something about "the Kingdom of Heaven." What can you conclude about the "Kingdom of Heaven" from this parable?
- What exactly is the "sin" that the servant committed?
- When Jesus says, "*Not seven times, but, seventy-seven times*" [18:22], what are the biblical implications?
- Do "other ancient authorities" offer a different wording to this same passage and if so, does it change the meaning of the statement in any way?

As always, if you need assistance, just call me.