

Sermon 20 August 2018 Forgiveness

Colossians 3:12-15 Matthew 18:21-35

When Peter asked Jesus how often he ought to forgive his fellow human being, and then answered his own question by suggesting that he should forgive seven times, he thought he was being quite generous. And he did have background justification for this. It was the traditional teaching of the Rabbis that a man should forgive someone, who had committed an offence, three times. After that, you weren't expected to forgive.

So Peter doubles that, adds one for good measure, and expects to be warmly commended. But instead Jesus replies that one should forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven! In other words, there is really no limit to our forgiveness. He then goes on to tell the story of the servant who is forgiven a large debt by his master and then goes away and deals mercilessly with a fellow servant who owes him a debt that is a fraction of the debt he was forgiven. He suffered the consequences.

This is a theme that runs through the New Testament and so lies at the heart of the teaching of Jesus. *'For there will be no mercy for you if you have not been merciful to others. But if you have been merciful, then God's mercy toward you will win out over his judgement against you.'* James 2:13. And from the Beatitudes, *'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.'* Matthew 5:7.

One of the interesting aspects of this story is how quickly the servant who owes his master a massive debt forgets about his own shortcomings as he turns on his fellow servant with a vengeance and demands pay-back of a much smaller debt. Before we pass judgement or sentence on anyone, we need to have a good look at ourselves, at our own iniquities. *'Why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?'* Matthew 7:3. It is something so many of us are guilty of.

I think this lies at the heart of the message in this story. We must accept that our faults are significant enough to warrant endless forgiveness, and that expecting endless forgiveness, we must in turn offer it to others.

I would like to refer to the reading from Colossians, and in particular verse 14, which reads, *'And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony.'*

In Greek there are four different words used for *love*. There is the noun *storge*, which means family love. There is *eros*, which has the connotation of sexual love. There is *philia*, which describes real affection, a word that describes the love you have for your nearest and dearest. I don't think we are expected to love our neighbours or our enemies to quite that extent.

Then there is *agape*, which is the word used here, and also in fact, whenever Jesus talks about love. *Agape* means that no matter how badly someone treats us, we will still regard that person with benevolence and goodwill. In other words, there is a very strong element of forgiveness in play here. And that forgiveness can be a powerful agent of change. Forgiveness has got to be the ultimate form of love, and as we know, love itself is a very powerful force.

I am reminded of the story of Jean Valjean, a central character in that great musical, Les Miserables. Jean served a 19 year jail sentence for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his hungry family. He entered the French penal system as an impressionable young man. He emerged tough, hardened and embittered by his experience.

When he was set free, he wandered the village roads seeking shelter. He was taken in by a kindly bishop. That night he lay awake until the household was asleep, then he crept into the dining room and made off with six silver plates and a silver soup ladle, the bishop's pride and joy.

The next morning three policemen arrived on the bishop's doorstep with Jean in tow. They had apprehended him with the stolen silverware in his possession. Jean's unlikely story was that the bishop had given him the silver.

The bishop astounded the police and Jean by greeting him like a long lost friend. 'So here you are! I am delighted to see you. You forgot to take the candlesticks as well. Did you not realise that I wanted you to have them as well?' Jean's eyes widened in disbelief. He was now staring at the old bishop with an expression for which there were no words. The bishop assured the police that the silver was indeed a gift from him and they took their leave, somewhat bemused.

The bishop did not change when he was alone with Jean. He gave him the candlesticks and said, 'Do not forget, do not ever forget, that you promised me to use the money to make yourself an honest man'.

The next day, Jean collapsed. His heart swelled and he burst into tears. It was the first time he had cried in 19 years. For the next 20 years a revengeful detective stalked Jean, hoping to catch him out. But repentance and forgiveness had transformed him. He became a dignified and respected mayor of a town and the detective could never attribute the slightest misdeed to him.

Mahatma Ghandi said, 'The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.' That is why forgiveness is so powerful and is such an agent of change where relationships are concerned. Jesus understood this so very well which is why forgiveness is the cornerstone of his teaching.

I want to finish with a quote I shared with you last year. It is so good that I have to repeat it. General Norman Schwartzkopf, Commander of the Coalition forces in the Persian Gulf War was asked if he thought there was room for forgiveness toward the people who harboured and abetted the terrorists who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks on America. He said, 'I believe that forgiving is God's function. Our job is to simply arrange the meeting.'

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