

Sermon 18 August 2024 Forgiveness

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

Last week I spoke about confession, so it is only appropriate that we look at forgiveness this week as confession and forgiveness really do go hand in hand. They are inextricably entwined, and because of that, there is bound to be some common ground to be covered. So apologies if some of what I say sounds a little familiar.

As we heard in our gospel reading, Peter asked Jesus how often he ought to forgive his fellow human being, and he answered his own question by suggesting that he should forgive seven times. He thought he was being quite generous, and he did have background for this. It was the traditional teaching of the Rabbis that a man should forgive someone, who has 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 give, 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 a fraction of what 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 shown 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 judgment 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 judgment or sentence on anyone, we need to have a good look at ourselves, at our own iniquities. I remind you of the quite from Jesus we alluded to last week, *'Why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?'* Matthew 7:3. As I said last week, it is something so many of us are guilty of, and as Christians, we are as guilty as anyone.

I think this lies at the heart of 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 binds us all together in perfect harmony.'* So let us look at this word 'love' and why it is relevant to forgiveness.

In Greek there are four different words for love. There is the noun *storge*, which means family love. There is *eros*, which has the connotation of intimate love. There is *philia*, which means real affection for those you have a very close connection with. I don't think we are expected to love our neighbours, or our enemies for that matter, 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 strong, very strong, element of forgiveness at play here. Hard? Difficult? Of course it is. No one could pretend otherwise. Our natural reaction when someone offends or hurts us is

to retaliate in some way, or if not actually retaliate, to have negative thoughts and feelings towards that person. And that is why forgiveness has to be the ultimate form of love as espoused by Jesus.

That is also why forgiveness can be such a powerful agent of change. Love itself is such a very powerful force. You might be familiar with 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 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 as 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, 'Don't forget' do not ever forget, that you promised 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 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 have said it before and I will say it again, it is not easy to be a good person, it is even harder to be a good Christian. And in terms of what Jesus both challenges us with and expects of us, forgiveness surely has to be the most challenging, because it goes against our natural inclination which is to respond with retaliation of some form or other. That is actually subscribing to the Old Testament ethic of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But Jesus neither practised nor taught retribution. On the contrary, he tells us, *'You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek as well.'* Matthew 5:38-39. If we are totally honest with ourselves, that goes against the grain. That is why forgiveness and the ability to forgive must be right up there with regards our prayer priorities. If we can find the power to do that, it will be transformative in terms of our relationship with others, our relationship with God, and even our relationship with ourselves.