

Pentecost 15

Paying It Forward

Sept. 17, 2017

Christ the King, Kenner

Texts: Genesis 50:15-21, Psalm 103:1-3, Matthew 18:21-35

In last week's Gospel, Jesus tells us what we should do if someone sins against us. But, did you happen to notice, something missing? He never mentioned forgiveness. Not once. Isn't that strange? Well, today he does. In fact, today's Gospel, Old Testament Reading and Psalm are all about forgiveness.

The twelve disciples got to spend every day with Jesus, during the three years he was with them on earth. During that time they heard him often speak about forgiveness. So much so that Peter, at least, began to wonder if there are any limits to forgiveness. So one day he asked Jesus point blank, "Lord, if a brother or sister in our community sins against me, how often should I forgive?" And then, just to show how important he knew forgiveness was to Jesus, he added, "Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

To which Jesus responded, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times" or, because several reliable manuscripts say it differently, "seventy times seven times." That would be 490 times, but who's keeping track.

Well, we do; most of us keep track. We have long memories. It's hard for many of us to let go of our grievances. Enough is enough. And we usually try to justify holding onto our grudge. We tell friends our stories of being wronged,

saying "you understand why I can't forgive don't you? You agree with me, I hope. You'd do the same in my situation, wouldn't you?" In other words, we sometimes try to explain why the offense against us is so unforgiveable.

But here's the thing. No one ever deserves to be forgiven. Not if it was a true offense, a real sin against us. So why should we forgive?

There are three reasons given in today's readings. Let's look at each.

The Old Testament reading is from Genesis. It's the wonderful account of Joseph being reconciled to his brothers. If anyone ever had a reason to never even speak to his brothers again, it was Joseph. Remember the story? Out of jealousy, because their father seemed to love him more than his other sons, the brothers sold him into slavery one day to some slave-traders on their way to Egypt. He was just a young boy. Then they lied to their father Jacob, telling him that Joseph had been killed by an animal.

Years passed. Joseph went through a series of highs and lows, but finally became prominent in Egypt where his vision saved the country from famine. The Israelites heard about the stored food in Egypt and came begging. They met, but didn't recognize Joseph who decided to have some fun with them by hiding his identity and making them squirm a bit. Finally when he revealed himself, they became frightened what he might do to them out of revenge. That's where today's First Reading picks up, when they tell him that their father, just before he died told them, "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Joseph broke

into tears, then his brothers also wept and said, "We are here as your slaves." And Joseph, who had every good reason to make them his slaves said, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones. In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them."

Why did Joseph forgive them? Because he perceived the hand of God in what happened, as the Lord had redeemed the situation by using Joseph to save the Israelites from starvation. What irony! It's one of the biggest twists in history. And part of the irony is that Joseph protests, "Am I in the place of God?" But, of course, that's exactly what he was in his ability to save his people.

But we hardly ever see God at work in someone doing us harm or injury. So we better find another reason for forgiving.

OK then. How about the motive given in today's Psalm and fleshed out in Jesus' parable. In the Psalm we say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God's holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all God's benefits" . . . and here they are: "who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases; who redeems your life from the grave and crowns you with steadfast love and mercy; who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like an eagle's" (Psalm 103:1-4).

The very first thing the psalmist lists among God's blessings is, "who forgives all your sins." And like the debtor in today's Gospel, we are meant to pay it forward, again, like Joseph to speak forgiveness in the place of God.

But paying it forward, we learn from today's Gospel, is not simply an act of kindness. If it doesn't come out of our sense of mercy, we should recognize it as a God-given obligation. The unforgiving slave is dragged before the king who says, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And here Jesus becomes very dramatic in spelling out the consequences. He says, "And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. " Jesus even adds a threat "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." Forgiveness can't be pro forma, it has to be sincere, from the heart. It's clear that forgiving someone is way more than an act of kindness; it can even be an urgent matter of self-preservation. That's why we pray, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." That's truly paying it forward. We forgive because through Christ, God first forgave us and continues to, regularly freely. Amen.

PS It's often said we should forgive and forget. But it's sometimes impossible to forget a particularly painful offense. Nor does forgiving mean remaining in a situation in which you continue to be hurt. Then it's easier to forgive from a distance when you're safe.

And some sins may require even more intentionality to forgive. I had a parishioner many years ago who told me she had been repeatedly abused in her youth by her father. He was long dead, but she just wanted to be rid of him. We talked about how she might accomplish that, and she ended up writing him a lengthy letter of forgiveness which she took with her to the cemetery to read over his grave. And in that way she was finally free of her burden.

Of course, most of us don't have to go to such efforts to forgive. We simply look at the cross and give thanks to God for forgiving us in Christ. And we pay it forward.