

Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness

Sermon preached by Rev. Rob Gotch

History bears witness to the primordial human reactions to being threatened, offended or hurt - aggression, retaliation, vengeance, retribution, saving face. These are the basic instincts of our humanity, and they have terrible consequences for families, communities and nations; terrible consequences that we see throughout our world.

These basic instincts provide a context in which we hear Simon Peter seeking to clarify the leadership responsibilities given to him by Jesus. He asks: 'Lord, how often should I forgive? Should I forgive even seven times?' To which Jesus replies: 'Not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times.' This reflects the tradition of Psalm 130 that, with God, sins are forgotten and forgiveness is unconditional and unlimited: 'If you, O Lord, should remember sins, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be worshipped.' Jesus knows that keeping count is not true forgiveness, but merely the postponing of vengeance until an opportunity arises to inflict a more painful retribution.

He tells a parable about a slave who owes his master 10,000 talents. Given that a talent is more than 15 years wages, this is a debt of such magnitude that it could never be repaid. The slave falls on his knees, seeking his master's patience and claiming that he will repay the debt, which is completely ridiculous. And yet, in an extraordinary act of mercy and forgiveness, the master cancels the slave's debt and sets him free. The former slave swaggers off, and happens to meet a fellow slave who owes him a much smaller debt. But the forgiven slave is not forgiving. He assaults and imprisons his fellow slave. The forgiven slave has received mercy, yet he doesn't practise it. He's been set free, but he ignores the obligations of this unexpected and undeserved liberty. His community is so distressed by this injustice that they tell the king, who summons his former slave, and rebukes him: 'You wicked slave, when you pleaded with me, you received mercy and forgiveness. Why haven't you shown mercy and forgiveness to others?' The king orders that the slave be tortured until he can repay his entire debt.

And just as we imagine that the slave has received his just deserts, we're interrupted by Jesus offering his commentary on the parable: 'So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.' It may sound like hyperbole, but Jesus knows that the practice of forgiveness offers liberation from the seductive power of vengeance that breeds violence and disfigures all that God has made good.

We recall that, in Matthew chapter 6, Jesus teaches his disciples a prayer that has the practise of forgiveness at its core. At first glance, this prayer seems to imply that forgiveness is transactional - that we are forgiven only if we forgive others, or that forgiveness is proportional - that we are forgiven in equal measure to our forgiveness of others. But the Lord's Prayer actually proclaims the reign of God, whose heavenly will arrives on earth among those for whom forgiveness is the source and destination of covenant life. Jesus is not merely offering his disciples another spiritual resource; rather, he teaches them a prayer that expresses his own faithful ministry, his own trusting death, his own newness of life. Indeed, it's a prayer in which he himself is

present and active. The will of God being done on earth as in heaven is nothing less than the forgiveness and reconciliation that leads people into the life of Christ, crucified and risen.

This is the point being made by the apostle Paul when he writes to the church at Rome, to challenge disunity in this new Christian community. Paul encourages them in this way: 'We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.'

I noticed in this week's order of service some words by a grieving widower expressing his appreciation for the care he's received and his 'deep feeling of belonging in a covenant community'. Belonging to Jesus Christ is a privilege and a responsibility'; it offers much and it expects much. Indeed, it invites the surrender of our own basic instincts in order that we might participate in Christ's disruptive insistence on forgiveness, through which we're drawn into God's future for all humanity. A couple of weeks ago, the Rev. Tim Costello, wrote an [open letter to church leaders](#) on the Voice, in which he recalls how the gospel is proclaimed through the church's distinctive lifestyle. He writes: 'From its earliest days, the church has navigated conflict and inequality. Jewish Christians insisted they would not eat with Christian Gentiles, until the apostles made it clear that transcending those divisions was at the heart of living out the gospel. They had the courage to overcome resistance, and the message of freedom in Christ and one family in Christ soon carried across the world.'¹

In the book of Genesis are two stories that I find particularly moving, and both are stories of unexpected forgiveness and reconciliation. Genesis 33 recalls the reunion of Jacob and his brother Esau, who'd parted years before in bitterness because Jacob had stolen his brother's birthright and their father's blessing. Believing that the passing years will have done little to diminish his brother's rage, Jacob anticipates their reunion by sending numerous gifts to Esau as a peace offering. On the eve of their encounter, Jacob wrestles through the night with a shadowy figure, and is blessed by a transformed destiny as he is renamed Israel. As Jacob limps towards his brother, Esau breaks into a run, not to attack Jacob but to embrace him, and Jacob declares: 'To see your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me with such favour.' And Genesis 45 recalls how Joseph, the son of Jacob sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, is now in a position of enormous power as governor of the Egyptian Pharaoh. The brothers arrive in Egypt seeking food to take home to their famine-stricken community. Joseph now has the opportunity and power to make his brothers accountable for their violence towards him, and for a while it seems like he might do precisely that. But he becomes distressed by their suffering, and ultimately embraces them in reconciling grace, later declaring to them: 'What you intended for evil, God intended for good.'

These ancient stories deeply reflect the purpose of God in Christ, crucified and risen, who forgives without limit, cancels all debts, and offers the life of reconciliation and peace. The psalmist declares: 'If you, O Lord, should remember sins, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be worshipped.' And Charles Wesley explains how this works in the life of community: 'All praise to our redeeming Lord, who joins us by his grace, and bids us, each to each restored, together seek his face.' In the midst of all that seeks to divide and conquer, may the Lord of grace give you courage to pursue his peace, as we share in his ministry of reconciliation.

And now to the holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, three persons and one God, be all glory and praise, dominion and power, now and forever. Amen.
