
As we forgive those ...
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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Readings from Scripture

Whether you take what is written in the Bible as fact, metaphor, myth or story, listen to these words now for the teaching they hold for you today.

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive them?’

- Wait a minute. Isn’t that a strange questions? Peter presupposes that we should forgive each other. The idea of forgiving each other is assumed. The only issue that Peter has is how many times to do it?
- Is that how we work? I don’t think so. I think - what I see in this church - is that forgiveness cannot be assumed. Today the story might read like this, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how would I decide whether or not to forgive them?”

As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

- Is Jesus nuts? And by the way, there are some ambiguities in the biblical Greek here. Jesus may actually be saying 70 times 7. Either way, Both 490 and 77 are a long way past 7. And certainly far beyond our more usual “1 strike and you’re out” approach to justice.
- Fortunately for us - or not - Jesus follows up with a story to illustrate his point.

‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When the king began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. But the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

- Wait a minute. Was that the right story? We started by talking about forgiveness. But Jesus’s story is about cancelling a debt. Yes, I realize that the language used is to “forgive a debt”. But earlier in the reading the question to Jesus was about offering forgiveness when another church member had sinned against us. Is that the same thing?
- In one sense No, not at all.
- But in another sense ... yes. When we are hurt by someone else, we expect them to make some sort of payment to us. It might be an apology, or it might be something more tangible. But when we are wronged, we expect some payment. Forgiveness On the other hand Is when we decide that waiting for that payment is not worth it to us. And so we cancel that debt. We stop expecting payment. We stop waiting for payment.
- The conclusion from that is that Jesus was a pretty good psychotherapist. And that he was more in line with Carl Jung than Carl Rogers.

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt.

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- Typical, right? Someone gives us a great gift and then we refuse to share ourselves.

When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “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 in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’

- Well, that was a twist. So the king forgave the first slave, but changed his mind later and reneged on their agreement. That doesn’t seem fair.
- Oh wait - this is a story. And a moralistic one. The moral is that if we do not forgive others then God will not forgive us.
- As it says in the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” I guess Jesus meant that literally!

Luke 23:26-49

As they led Jesus away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.

- So Jesus did not carry his own cross? The Romans forced Simon of Cyrene to do that.
- Was that because Jesus had been beaten and could not do it himself?
- Was that normal?
- How often do we feel like we are forced to accommodate someone else’s weakness?

A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, “Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.” Then they will begin to say to the mountains, “Fall on us”; and to the hills, “Cover us.” For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?’

- Jesus is not having a good day. Even though he is not being forced to carry his own cross, it must have been a terrible day for him.
- But blessing women who are barren? What is that about? People back then considered that God was punishing them if they were barren.
- I do not believe that Jesus is taking sides here on the pro-life / pro-choice debate.
- I do not believe that Jesus is predicting the environmental destruction of our planet, creating a world we do not want to bring children into.
- Was Jesus just exasperated?

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’

- Again - is Jesus nuts?
- Jesus is forgiving the Romans for crucifying him in the middle of the crucifixion? That’s pretty spicy.
- Jesus was serious about this forgiveness thing.

And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the

leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’

- You would think that crucifying a person would be bad enough without taunting them. I guess that’s human nature for you.
- I’m surprised that Jesus’s clothes were worth fighting for. But I suppose that was standard operating procedure at a crucifixion.

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding Jesus and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

- So there is justice among thieves. At least sometimes.
- And Jesus responds in a very pastoral way. Jesus helps the man find at least some peace while they are both dying.

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’ And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

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- And then, it is finished.
 - All that the disciples could do is watch.
 - Jesus almost last words were pastoral words to comfort the person beside him.
 - Jesus almost almost last works were pastoral words to comfort the Romans.

As Christians, we are often told that we should follow Jesus. And follow Jesus to the cross if necessary. Well, today is one of those days. Good Friday is the day that we have followed Jesus through Lent and we are now at the cross. And now that we are here, what should we do? This morning, at the foot of this cross, I invite each one of us to forgive someone else. Here's what I have in mind.

I invite each one of us to consider our own lives. And I invite us to reflect on a person or a situation where we need the healing that comes from forgiveness. Perhaps someone for whom we have been withholding forgiveness. The other person does not have to be present. The other person does not even have to be alive. The other person might be you.

Because forgiveness is something we do ourselves. Forgiveness is when we relinquish our need for control, revenge, and compensation. Forgiveness is when we decide to move forward in our own lives. Forgiveness is about ourselves, not the other person. And forgiveness - done properly - is always about our future, not our past.

Forgiveness is unlocking a door to set someone free - and realizing that you yourself were the prisoner. Today - at the foot of this cross - I invite you to stop being a prisoner to your past. Forgive, and be forgiven. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive others.

The way to the cross leads to many things. Today it is my hope and my prayer that it leads each of us to a deep forgiveness. Forgive, and live.

Amen.

During the liturgy of forgiveness:

- From the Lord's Prayer - what is the relationship between receiving forgiveness from God and offering forgiveness to others? It's not cattle trading!
- How can we live out forgiven lives if we cannot understand forgiveness?
- How can we live out resurrection lives if we do not forgive others?
- Invite people to use paper:
 - write the name of a person or situation
 - come forward and shred the paper
 - stay and watch the paper being shredded because forgiveness takes time.
Listen to the piercing sound of the shredder.
 - walk away - let go and let God