SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN Sermon for September 17, 2017

Genesis 50: 15-21

Psalm 103: 8-13

Romans 14: 1-12

Matthew 18: 21-35

We've been talking a lot about forgiveness lately, as we follow the lectionary path through the gospels. And as we follow that path, I think we have begun to see why forgiveness occupies such a central role - some might even say, **the** central role - in leading the Christian life according to Christ's own guidance.

So we saw first that the authority to forgive others in one of the greatest privileges and responsibilities of the Christian life. When Jesus tells His disciples - and through them, when He tells us - that what we loose on earth is also loosed in Heaven, He is thereby granting us an authority no one else on earth has or has ever had, but which is reserved entirely to His followers. When you as a Christian forgive someone who has sinned against you - that is, who has harmed you through an action that runs contrary to God's will - you have the authority to forgive that person in the eyes of God, just as Jesus was granted the authority to forgive all of us in the eyes of God for all our sins. That is truly an authority that Caesar never had, that no human being ever had outside of Christ, because it is a supernatural authority, one that is operative in the Kingdom of God, not the earthly kingdom.

And we also saw how forgiveness, in addition to being an exercise of authority, is also the key to receiving all the others spiritual gifts of the kingdom of God. What frustrates God so much when we fail to exercise forgiveness is that our refusal literally blocks God from providing us all the other fruits of the spirit, the treasures of the Kingdom. If you think of our relationship with God on the image of an umbilical cord, our refusal to forgive others is like putting a clamp around that cord, so that no other life-giving nutrients can flow through it. Of if you think of that relationship to God as being like a branch to a vine, then refusing to forgive others is like breaking the branch, so that the sap ceases to flow, and the branch withers and dries, spiritually speaking.

Our Gospel reading for today encapsulates both of these points about forgiveness in the form of a beautiful and famous parable, and it brings to full flower, I think, the revelation about the centrality of forgiveness both to God's own character as well as to God's plan of salvation for His creation, for us. It is the completion of a revelation that began in Genesis and runs \through the entire Bible.

Our OT reading from Genesis this morning, for example, occurs right at the book's conclusion, and brings to a close the entire foundational history of humankind that began in the garden of Eden. And the concluding note of this great first movement of the symphony that is the Bible is the note of forgiveness.

The story of Joseph is a foreshadowing of the story of Jesus. Betrayed by his own brothers and sold into slavery, Joseph eventually proves to be their savior, redeeming them from death itself, and as our reading describes, freely granting them forgiveness at the request of their common father.

And just so, Jesus, our brother, rising again from the slavery of death, offers all of us our Father's forgiveness.

What a wonderful picture, what a wonderful foreshadowing, of the far greater forgiveness - the universal forgiveness of sin - and the far greater redemption - the universal redemption from death - and the far greater salvation - the salvation unto eternal life – accomplished for us by our Lord and Savior on the cross and in the resurrection.

And forgiveness is the foundation of it all.

And the Psalmist echoes the same theme:

*The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.  
He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.  
For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.*

The Lord is merciful and gracious. What is it to be merciful? We've all seen movies where the villain falls on his knees and pleas for mercy. What is he pleading for? He's pleading that his transgressions be overlooked. That he be treated not according to what he **deserves**, but according to the goodness of his benefactor.

The Lord is merciful and gracious. What is it to be gracious? The gracious host is someone who treats her guests, not according to their relative class or status, but according to her own good nature and generosity.

And that's exactly the quality of God the Psalmist is highlighting:

*He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

The Psalmist, to the best of his ability, to the best of his insight, is describing for us the heart of God. And that's what the Psalmist sees there: mercy, grace, or in a single word: forgiveness.

And so we come to the parable of today's reading, and in it, the full revelation of the heart of God by the son of God. So let's read it together.

Read Matthew 18: 21-35

Seventy times seven. That seems like a lot, doesn't it? But of course we realize that it's just a figure of speech that our Lord is using it to emphasize the importance of forgiveness. And then he offers the parable to illustrate the nature of that importance.

The king in the parable, out of pity, forgives a very substantial debt of one of his servants, but the servant then refuses to forgive a very minor debt of someone who owes him money. And the King, in the story, is very disappointed with that development, to the extent that he has the servant thrown in jail and punished. (Actually "tortured.")

What is Christ teaching us in this parable? That God will torture us if we don't live up to His expectations?

Obviously not. The king here is modeled after a typical eastern monarch. And the chief characteristic of the monarchs of that time and place was their unshakable belief and pride in their own grandeur. The king forgives the servant's debt to demonstrate his own magnanimity, and his anger at his servant's subsequent miserliness - throw him in jail and torture him until he repays me! - would be a predictable response from such an all-powerful and vainglorious potentate who sees one of his subject deviate from the model he himself, in all his royal splendor, had provided.

And of course, as Jesus Himself personifies, our God is nothing at all like that monarch.

Jesus is not modeling God after some vain and pompous aristocrat. What Jesus is teaching us is that gifts of the Kingdom carries with it them responsibility - and that this is especially true of the first and greatest gift, the gift of the forgiveness of sins. What is that responsibility? It is to spread the gift around to others, insofar as we have opportunity to do so.

What Jesus is teaching us is that we ourselves, as His followers, are the only vehicles, the only tools, the only vessels, the only branches, the only umbilical cords, that God has for spreading Christ's forgiveness into the world, and that without that proliferation of forgiveness, nothing much else can be spiritually accomplished.

I'm reminded of something that happened when I was in grade school. I was appointed to be the playground monitor for a day. I don't remember exactly what that meant, except I got to wear a sash and stand at the school door looking out over the playground during play period. Some semi police function, I guess.

Anyway, I was standing there on duty, feeling pretty important, when a little classmate I knew who was a notorious 'bad' kid, walked up to me and completely out of the blue, he made a fist and hit me as hard as he could in that place where men hate to be hit the most.

I went down like a rock and I don't remember exactly what happened right after that, but there was a lot of excitement, and this little kid and I ended up in the principal's office. The principal was asking what happened, whose fault it was, and even though I was still in a lot of pain and even though the other kid was clearly one hundred percent the instigator, I didn't tell on him, and we both ended up getting the same punishment.

What’s important in our context about the story is the reason I didn't snitch on the other kid. It wasn't because I was following some early appreciation of the manly code of honor about not snitching. I remember very distinctly it was because I had a literally overwhelming sense of how messed up this kid had to be, to do such a mean and senseless thing. I remember experiencing it as a kind of dread that I might somehow add to his inner darkness, and that dread literally rendered me incapable of any speech that might point to him as the culprit. I remember even being ashamed by my not being able to be the good little cop in the principal's eyes.

It is only many many years later that, in looking back, I came to realize that I was a far more mature citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven at the age of eight or nine that I was when I became much more worldly-wise or even when I became much more theologically sophisticated, or even that I am now. I like to think that that completely non-deliberated act of forgiveness - of absorbing the punishment that rightfully belonged to someone else - I like to think it may have played some part in the spiritual plan God was working out for that little very 'bad' kid. And in my advanced years, it helps me to understand why Jesus once made that endlessly fascinating observation, and in saying it, made it so, that unless we become as little children, we can't even see the Kingdom of God.

And so, heavenly Father, we pray today that You erase revenge and retribution from our hearts. We ask that You constantly remind us of our ignorance of the inner life of others, and of our own lack of qualification to serve as their judge. We turn to the example of Your beloved Son who offered forgiveness even to those who were nailing Him to a cross, and we pray that ever more and more, as He is, so might we be in this world. And we ask for all these things in His name.