SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, ASSOCIATE TO THE RECTOR
THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 17, 2017
GENESIS 50:1-21; PSALM 103:1-2, 9-14; ROMANS 14:1-12; MATTHEW 18:21-35

FORGIVENESS AND WHOLENESS

Matthew 18:21-35 *[Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he 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. So 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. 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 would pay the debt. 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 would 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."]

When my children were quite young, we lived on a street with several other families with small children. Often on Friday evening, several of the families would end up in someone's kitchen, catching up on the week and checking in on each other. I remember one evening when several of the children were out of sorts and could not stop provoking each other. The fighting would escalate and a parent would intervene, stopping the offender and comforting the afflicted (as much as we could tell the

difference between the two, which was not easy). And then it got interesting.

Some of the parents insisted that the offending child immediately apologize to the other, and that the afflicted child immediately offer forgiveness. "Say sorry!" the parent insisted to one. And then "Say it's OK!" to the other. The children would do as they were told, go back to playing, and pretty soon, because they were tired and grumpy, the whole cycle would repeat itself.

When things eventually calmed down and the parents could talk with each other, there was some heated disagreement about insisting on the immediate "Sorry/It's OK." One father said, "That's the only way the children will learn to take responsibility for their offenses and learn to forgive each other." A mother disagreed, "If they don't *feel* sorry and don't want to forgive, you're not teaching them anything!" A third parent asked, "How do you teach someone to forgive, anyway?"

That was almost 20 years ago, but it's a pretty timeless question. Virtually every religion values forgiveness highly and for Christians, the commandment to forgive is right up there with loving God and loving our neighbor. Forgiveness -- our own and others -- is at the heart of our relationship with God and with our community. In the Lord's Prayer, we say, "Forgive us, as we forgive others."

In the gospel today, Jesus' mandate for forgiveness is illustrated by an extreme parable, where a person receives forgiveness for their debt of ten thousand talents but will not forgive another who owes him a hundred denarii. A single talent is equivalent to 15 years of wages, so ten thousand talents is beyond imagining; it dwarfs the 100 denarii -- a couple months' wages -- that is owed in return. By telling this story with such outrageous comparisons, Jesus seems to be saying, "Don't keep track of the offenses done to you; don't measure and compare them to others. Forgive your brother or sister from your heart in all times and places."

Before we explore how to forgive, I want to talk first about some misconceptions about forgiveness.[1] Forgiveness is not condoning what someone has done to us. It is not a quick, "That's OK" when we are hurt, as if it doesn't matter or we're fine with it happening again. Forgiveness is not granting absolution to another person, implying that they do not have their own work of repentance and restoration of relationship with God and others.

Forgiveness is not forgetting about the hurt -- to forgive and forget is often impossible. We can forget the little slights, but the bigger wounds -- like abuse, betrayal, neglect -- can never really be forgotten. They influence our sense of self, our expectations of others, and our understanding of the world around us.

Forgiveness is about freedom. It is about acknowledging the burden of long-standing

[1] William A. Meninger, The Process of Forgiveness, 30-33.

grievances and the cost of dwelling in resentment, anger and vengeance. The need for forgiveness is for ourselves, because that is the only way to be free.

William Meninger, the Benedictine author and spiritual teacher, says that forgiveness is not an act of will, but more of a process.[2] It is a journey that begins with a wound or disappointment and travels through often difficult terrain, but whose destination is wholeness, freedom, and peace. He writes, "The process of forgiveness is a form of realism. It allows us, perhaps for the first time in our life, to see ourselves, others and events of our life as they really are."[3]

Meninger describes four stages in this process toward wholeness and forgiveness.[4]

The first stage is claiming the hurt. This is not easy. It requires that each of us name what happened, who was responsible, and how it has impacted our lives -- including our relationships with others, our sense of self, and our expectations for happiness and satisfaction.

The second stage is seeking some explanation for what happened. In this stage, a person often turns to guilt -- they think there must have been something I did to cause this person to hurt me or I am to blame for not stopping it or standing up for myself.

The third stage begins when a person accepts that they are not responsible for their wounds. They experience their own sorrow and helplessness, and their lack of control over the situation. This can also be a time when we recognize our wounds are not unique, that there are others who understand and who can sympathize with us.

The fourth stage is when we fully experience the anger of being hurt and channel it into a positive, forward-looking energy. We refuse to identify as a victim, but as someone who can seek healing and take action toward it. We realize that moving on with our lives is an act of power, despite the fact that we have been hurt.

For each of these stages, there is a danger of getting stuck. A person can spend years or even a lifetime locked in a closed loop of denial, self-blame, victimhood, or anger over a deep wound. The key is to recognize where we are in this process, and continue on the journey, with God's help, remembering that God's love does not depend on our ability to change. God loves us so that we can change.

Meninger says that the final stage is where forgiveness happens. It is not a goal in itself, but a by-product of healing our wounds and embracing our God-given wholeness. We no longer want to carry resentment or bitterness because it gets in the way of enjoying the beauty and richness of simply being alive. We forgive so we can freely be the person we were created to be.

---

[2] Ibid 18.

[3] Ibid 34.

[4] The four stages toward wholeness and the prayer practices that facilitate them are described in detail in Meninger's book, "The Process of Forgiveness."

When I look back on that conversation in our kitchen 20 years ago, I see that we were imagining forgiveness as a transaction, where once an apology or admission of wrongdoing is offered, forgiveness and restoration follows automatically, like a receipt of payment. That may be a useful tool for little children who are just learning how to live alongside other human beings with dignity and respect (and parents still disagree about this).

But for the rest of us, we forgive -- we engage in the process of forgiveness -- because it makes us free and whole. This is the way we follow Jesus, the way we love each other, and the way we express God's love in our lives.

Amen.

SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!