

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 17, 2023
 “Let the Healing Begin” (Matthew 18:21-35)

The gospel text for today takes up where last Sunday’s left off and continues with the theme of forgiveness. Remember how Jesus told the disciples that they should take whatever steps were necessary to reconcile a broken relationship? Well, it seems as though Peter was struck by what Jesus said. Apparently, he had had a falling out with someone whom he would call a brother. And with Peter’s strong personality, that seems like a real possibility. He and his brother were not called *The Sons of Thunder* for nothing.

Peter may have been having trouble forgiving this person, so he went to Jesus and said, *Lord, you’re always talking about forgiving people. You talk about turning the other cheek and you tell us to pray for God to forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. So, should we forgive them as many as seven times?* Obviously, Peter could bring himself to forgive a brother the first time he was wronged. He could even forgive him a second and third time, but he began to wonder how far his forgiveness should extend.

We all know it’s easy to forgive a little, but there has to be a limit, doesn’t there? After all, a person only has two cheeks. Let’s be honest with ourselves this morning. We all know how Peter felt. Forgiving someone can be a very difficult thing. When someone does something to hurt us, we want revenge. We want to hurt them back, not forgive them, because holding a grudge is much easier than forgiving. Like little children on the beach, if someone knocks over our sand castle, the first thing we want to do is knock over theirs. We know we ought to forgive them, but it’s not easy. It’s ever harder if that person hurts us badly or continues to hurt us again and again. So, seven times must have seemed like a reasonable – and generous – number of times for Peter. And it probably seems more than reasonable to us.

But Jesus vetoed his proposal, *Not just seven times, but seventy times seven*. So Peter whipped out his calculator and said, *That’s 490 times! Are you saying I should forgive my brother 490 times? And if he does it a 491st time, can I whollup him one?*

Of course, Jesus didn’t literally mean 490 times. The numbers Jesus used were symbolic. Seven symbolizes the fullness of God’s work. Jesus took that number, squared it, and multiplied it by 10. By using such an astronomical number, Jesus was saying that forgiveness of others should never be limited; that it should be practiced whenever the need for it arises. He meant that Peter should keep forgiving his brother or sister just as God keeps forgiving us. So, to illustrate the point, Jesus told a parable, comparing God’s kingdom with a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

The king had brought before him a servant who owed him 10,000 talents – an exorbitant amount of money – equaling about fifteen years of labor. Of course, the servant could not pay; so the king ordered the servant, along with his wife and children, to be sold into slavery and all his possessions sold and applied toward the debt. The servant threw himself at the king’s feet in total submission, and promised to repay everything. He didn’t ask for forgiveness, but for more time, even though it was virtually impossible to repay such a large sum.

The king was moved with compassion and had mercy on the servant. Instead of granting the servant's request for more time, he released him from the debt. This servant was given a new lease on life! Publisher's Clearing House had knocked at his door and made him an instant winner. Unfortunately, this marvelous gift of grace had left him unchanged. Inside, he was the same as he had always been and was now unable to pass his good fortune along to the next guy.

The story continues with an ironic twist. As the servant left the king's court – carefree and debt free – he came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him 100 denarii, which was peanuts when compared with what he had owed the king. Immediately, he seized his debtor by the throat and demanded payment. The second servant responded just as the first servant had responded to the king. He fell on his knees and pleaded with him for some additional time. But the first servant, now having the upper hand, refused to grant the additional time and had him thrown into jail. He simply refused to extend the same grace that had been extended to him only moments before.

When the king found out, he was furious. He summoned the servant and said, *I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Then the next thing I hear is that you have your fellow servant thrown into prison! I showed mercy to you, but you did not show mercy to him.* Then the king handed him over to be tortured until he could pay the entire debt.

Jesus wanted Peter – and us – to realize how much God forgives us; and that we, in turn, should forgive our brothers and sisters for the little things they do to us. No, it's not easy to forgive. Like Peter, we ask Jesus, *How long must this go on? How much forgiving is enough? When can I stop turning the other cheek?* Jesus replies, *Who said you could stop? You want God to forgive all the many things you have done. Why not forgive others for what they have done?*

My friends, forgiveness isn't a matter of tallying rights and wrongs. There are no accountants or bookkeepers in the kingdom. Forgiveness is a matter of grace. Because God graciously forgives us from our sin, we should try to be just as gracious to others. The question this text puts before us is this: How can we, who have hurt God so deeply with our sins, not forgive as we have been forgiven? But I think there is more. God created us to live in freedom and wholeness, and the only way we can do that is if we are able to forgive.

Jill Briscoe was counseling a woman who was also dealing with a great load of emotional pain. In the course of their conversation, the woman blurted out, *My husband abused me.* Slowly, she shared the painful details of her suffering. Yet as Jill listened, she noticed no marks on the woman that would indicate the horrible abuse she had endured. Finally, she asked the woman, *When did this happen?* And the woman replied, *Twenty years ago.*

Because she had never healed emotionally from the abusive relationship, the pain was still just as intense in her mind as on the day he first hit her. Until she could forgive her husband and work through the pain, this woman would continue to relive her pain and fear. How many of us do the very same thing? We hang on to the hurt or pain someone has caused us and refuse to let it go. We hold grudges and allow resentment to fill our hearts. And we live our lives in a state of bitterness.

We all know people like that. Perhaps we're one of them. We go years – years! – not talking to certain people and avoiding them altogether because of something they've said or done in the past. We want nothing to do with them, and we somehow think that we're punishing them by denying them a relationship with us. But the irony is that we're not hurting them at all. Chances are they could not care less if we acknowledge them or not; and they certainly don't lose any sleep over the broken relationship. But we, the ones holding the grudge, are the ones who lay awake at night, silently hating the other person. We're the ones it eats up inside. We're the ones who do the real suffering.

Past hurts, you see, become intolerable baggage as time goes on. Unless we are able to forgive, we can never be free to be a whole person – the person God created us to be. Instead, we become a prisoner. We are imprisoned by our anger, our hurt, and our inability to let go of the past and move on. The only thing that can free us from such and existence is the ability to forgive. And the only place to find that ability is in Christ.

At the foot of the cross – God's perfect display of compassion and forgiveness – we must acknowledge our need for help. We need to ask God to forgive our sins and then we need to ask him to help us forgive others. And when we lay our hearts open before him, he will help. He knows that unless forgiveness is total and unlimited our healing will not take place, and he will work to make us whole again.

Don't let harboring anger and resentment make you a prisoner. Turn to the one and only place where forgiveness can be found, and be free once again. Is there someone you need to forgive? A member of your own family, perhaps? A spouse, a sister, a parent, or someone you work with? Don't delay. Bring it to Christ today and let the healing begin. Amen.