

Romans 14.1-12; Matthew 18.21-35 – 13th September 2020

I wonder if you remember times when you have been angry or impatient or behaved in a way that you have regretted – or perhaps someone has been like that towards you?

Did you find it easy to forgive them – and actually, did you find it easy to forgive yourself? Because sometimes, it's much harder to forgive ourselves...

If I said to you that I had been really busy, tired, hungry – all the trigger points that go with having a low tolerance level – and that I had snapped at my friend – and had upset them and felt awful about it – and then said sorry – she said it was okay – but then I still felt really awful about myself, what would you say to me?

You might say, 'Don't be too hard on yourself' – you've done your best to put it right, we all do that at times etc...'

But how often it is that we don't give the same compassion to ourselves....

Very often we think forgiveness is about 'letting them off the hook' – that we are expected to forget the wrong that was done. But actually I believe it is so much more than that.

Forgiving is a pathway to freedom from bondage of negativity that can have a really life-sapping effect on us spiritually that can then affect us emotionally – and physically in some cases - and in how we live our lives and how we see the world.

Forgiveness begins as an individual journey or setting ourselves free from the burdens of the past. It was Gandhi, who said "an eye for an eye" leaves the whole world blind. Forgiveness on the other hand allows us all to let go and move on.

In a funny sort of way, sometimes we get used to the feeling of resentment about a certain situation and it becomes a barrier to any sort of love being offered and received – forgiveness is about us – it is about setting ourselves free – The Greek word for forgiveness is *apheemei*. It means "letting go."

Sometimes though, the action or resentment that we are being asked to forgive seems impossible to forgive and forget – let's face it we are all fallible in being capable of creating havoc when we are out of kilter with the spirit of kindness and consideration and tolerance and patience.

And taking that to a communal or national or global level can be catastrophic – and we know so well with all the conflict going on today – some of the inflictions we have caused one another is enough to make one weep – and indeed Jesus did just that, didn't he as he saw how far away from loving living people of his time had become.

Today's reading begins with the question of 'How often should I forgive the one who sins *against me*?' Peter pitches 'seven times' – which sounds generous, and is more than suggested by contemporary rabbis who thought three would be enough. But Jesus tells him to stop counting. Forgiveness is not about the maths – it is about love.

The numbers plunge us into the Old Testament where we come face to face with the logic of Jesus' response. Peter's number echoes the seven-fold vengeance threatened to those who harm Cain. Jesus' seventy times seven echoes the Jubilee at the heart of Old Testament life. Those living the Jubilee are perpetually forgiving.

To illustrate this, Jesus tells a parable that comes from the everyday world of life in the empire – the very world that the Jubilee was meant to regulate. It is a story at once funny and serious. The amounts owed make the story fantastical and amusing. The attitude of the slave is chilling as we realise Jesus is talking about Peter – and us.

A talent was the largest unit of currency (actually a measure of weight, about 30kg, usually of silver) worth 6,000 denarii. A denarius was a good day's wage for a labourer. Myria (10,000, from where we get the word 'myriad') was the biggest number in Greek. So here Jesus is saying that this slave owed the biggest number of the largest unit of currency to his master. We might say that he owed zillions!

Unable to pay such a debt, the slave throws himself on his master's mercy. The master's heart goes out to him ('took pity', v.27, is the same term that is used of Jesus in 9.36) and he writes off the entire amount. Wow! Having experienced such grace, the slave then demands that a colleague pay back the few pounds he owes him and throws him in jail when he doesn't.

It's hard to resist a quiet cheer when the slave gets his comeuppance! But the parable serves to illustrate the foundational principle of relationships among disciples – namely that they are built on perpetual forgiveness.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us – forgiveness is about relationships – focusing on what brings us together rather than what drives us apart – we need to give and take, live and let live and cultivate the attitude of the Jubilee – cultivate a flow of kindness and generosity of heart as we go a little deeper into perhaps giving some thought as to why someone behaved the way they did – or giving some thought to why we reacted in the way we did to whatever it was that caused us to seek forgiveness.

And the bottom line at the end of the day – the main reason for our call to forgiveness is that we have been forgiven first – we are loved and cherished by a loving God despite our frailties and failures and our moodiness and wrong choices in life. We are seen for who we really are – made up in the image of God – a child of God – and we are asked to try and offer that compassion in someone else when their ideal image of a loved child of God is hidden behind some life knocks or experiences that have covered over their sense of peaceful living that plays out in ways that might cause hurt to other people.

Part of the remit of being human is that we fall short of the ideal love that God bestows upon us all – but there is a way we can aspire to being able to forgive and receive forgiveness – and that with through the loving grace of God that can give us courage and strength to forgive and shape our attitude in a warmer and more tolerant way.

Jesus wanted his disciples to know the boundless nature of God's mercy, and having known that infinite divine grace and mercy, wanted them to learn to forgive others. And our prayer today is that we too can be filled with the wideness of God's mercy and grace and be strengthened to soften our hearts and become filled with a forgiving spirit that makes for peace for ourselves that can outpour into our relationships and into our daily lives. Trying is the achievement – if at first we don't succeed, try and try again – and prayers for help at the centre of that trying can only give us a better chance of softening our hearts to receiving God's love so that we can use that for-giving out to others... Amen.

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