



The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Sunday, September 13th, 2020

The Venerable Peter Scott

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, “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.”

Forgiveness

There might have been an easier or more relevant reading that could have started us off to our in-person worship today. And yet, forgiveness and mercy are central to the Christian faith for they are what we all have received through Jesus. It is something that all need to hear. Secular society has recently come up with

something called cancel culture, which is actually has been around since the beginning of time, we just have a new name for it. Cancel culture is a form of boycott in which an individual who has acted or spoken in a questionable or controversial manner is boycotted. It would seem that forgiveness, if a person repents, is now not in any way shape or form, not an option – this also may not be new. I gave the example in an earlier sermon of Neil Golightly, the Communications officer stepped down after an employee complained about an article he wrote in 1987 that said women should not serve in combat and was recently let go, in spite of saying it was wrong for having said it and offered an outright apology. I know what is happening here, but I really can't understand it. I am going to try and answer some questions that we might ask of this text, namely two: What is the meaning of "to forgive"? Does repentance have to precede forgiveness?

What is the meaning of forgiveness? To begin with, the take away from this passage is not that forgiveness means allowing the person to continue to sin 70 times 7 times. There is a correction, there is a turning around, a 180, which we call repentance. The parable, as Jesus explains at the end, is a matter of the heart: *So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*" And what will God do, send us to the place you don't want to go to. And what are we to do: have mercy and forgive as we have been forgiven. It is the story of stories of hypocrite who asks for forgiveness having not forgiven. And so, what does the word forgiveness mean? The Greek word for forgiveness in this passage is *aphiemi* which means "to send away" or "to make apart". The image of sin that is often used is missing the mark, as in not hitting the bullseye on a target. Forgiveness 'sends away' or removes the arrows that missed the bullseye, missed perfection and so nothing imperfect remains as they have been sent away or removed. When we forgive people, it takes away those arrows that sting the heart and allow us to carry on with our lives. The second question is equally important for there are occasions.

Does repentance need to precede forgiveness? I believe that we do not have to forgive someone who is unrepentant. Having said that, there is the thought and perhaps wise counsel, that we as Christians need to be forgiving towards the unrepentant. Why do I say that, you might ask, because it doesn't make sense. In this case it is about us who have been wounded. This, in fact, is the emphasis of the passage when it says that we are to forgive from our heart. If we hold grudges, and I suspect one or two of us have, because someone has not repented or asked for forgiveness then effects us more than the sinner. And we just can't say we forgive them if we don't mean it in our heart. I will admit that I have done that in the past, it is something that I avoid at all costs, but there have been occasions. Forgiving can heal us, remove inner turmoil and hope of revenge. Forgiving, in this instance,

doesn't restore the relationship, but it needs to precede any chance of reconciliation. So the person is forgiven before repenting and asking for forgiveness and this might lead to them repenting. We might not say it, but our actions and words might show them that the door is open and we are ready to hear them ask.

Forgiveness, forgiveness takes away those arrows that sting the heart and allow us to carry on with our lives. And, forgiving when someone doesn't ask for forgiveness or repent allows our hearts to carry on with our lives. May we do that. Amen.