

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 17, 2017

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## “Labor of Love”

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Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35; 14 Pentecost A RCL; Proper 19

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So... if Heaven is filled with nothing but a bunch of forgiven sinners, then it stands to reason that Hell must be filled with a bunch of sinners that have not been forgiven. Right? I don't think so. Because, I don't think Jesus wasted his time on this earth. I don't believe he lived and died to forgive only some of us. It must be that the sinners in Heaven figured out how to let forgiveness have its way with them. They learned how to forgive and how to be forgiven. Forgiveness makes all the difference in our lives.

And if you're not sure you agree with me, then try to live with anger. Try to enjoy endless days and nights filled with malice and a constant simmering disdain toward another human being. Try to hold onto a desire for vengeance, a burning need for retribution against another person. It can make life a misery.

See a great mistake I believe many Christians make is to assume that Jesus teaches us to forgive only for the sake of the persons who have caused us great offense. It will be good for them if we forgive them. But why *should* we forgive them

for doing what is wrong? They don't deserve it. Why should we forgive when we have been deeply harmed by another, and especially when they show absolutely no remorse for the harm they have done to us? Why should we forgive that wayward spouse? Why should we forgive the parents that neglected us? Why should we forgive the friend who took advantage of us? Why shouldn't we seek retribution, take our pound of flesh when our flesh has been pounded? Remember the ancient Hebrew law?... an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth?

Jesus remembers that law, and he asks that we follow a different way. Vengeance, retribution, judgment, anger, and hatred establish an unbreakable cycle of violence and destruction within our world and within our lives. To hate another is to invite hatred in return. To judge another invites judgment upon our own faults. To take retribution upon another is to insure that they, and likely their offspring, will seek to do the same to you and yours. And the cycle is set. Why forgive? Because we cannot live well with the burden of our judgments and our grudges and our needs for revenge. I believe Jesus teaches us to forgive someone who hurts us not just for their sake, but for our own.

I like to think of forgiveness like this... All of life is dependent upon the nourishment of forgiveness. Like water, forgiveness is something the world must have in order to continue to live. I think of forgiveness like a river that flows through

a fertile valley, sustaining it, nourishing it, keeping it green and alive, washing away impurities, cooling the air, and providing comfort and a haven for life. But take away that river, and the fertile valley begins to decay. The ground grows dry and the plants grow brittle. Blossoms drop and stems wilt. The valley becomes pale and the air a hot, dusty haze, and no life remains for long.

Is it too much to say that Jesus teaches us to forgive, because forgiveness is as necessary to the continuation of healthy life on earth as is pure water or clean air? I don't think that's too much to say. Without forgiveness, we only decay, we'll only continue to hurt... and to hurt one another. Doesn't matter whether our failure to forgive is in the name of pride or righteousness or patriotism or security or justice. It doesn't matter. Without forgiveness, we are already in Hell.

But how do we get to that place where we can forgive? Well, I don't think that is easy, and I don't think it something that can be rushed, and it's a very personal work. But I do think it helps to take stock of how much we have been forgiven. I mean you'd think that Jesus has gone to great extremes to demand that his followers forgive not once, not twice, but seventy-seven times! To accept the wrong someone does to us so often and to forgive it so many times: Doesn't that just point out some weakness, our own co-dependency in a bad relationship? But think about it...

On any given day, we can do something that that is hurtful to another. We can fail to look out for our neighbor, we can be dishonest, we can neglect God, we can take what doesn't really belong to us, we can bear a grudge against an old enemy or make a new one, we can curse the people who bother us, we can fail to take care of someone in need, we can hoard what we have been given and not share. We can offend God and one another in so many overt or subtle, yet real, ways on any given day. Now, recently I turned 54 years old. If I've got the math right, that means I've lived about 19,710 days. But let's not even take into account the first five years of life when our moral and spiritual compasses are just forming. Taking out those years, let's say I've lived 17,855 days of moral accountability. Now let's be generous and assume I've been a pretty good guy, so maybe I've only sinned on average, say, once every five days. That means I've had at least 3,577 opportunities to need your forgiveness and God's. 3,577 and counting. So, when Jesus asks that we forgive others seventy-seven times, that just doesn't seem so bad. And really, that seventy-seven times is, after all, just a biblical way of saying: Forgive whenever you need to forgive.

You know, it may be that the human capacity to do harm to another is near unlimited, but our capacity to forgive is quite limited. Some hurts run extremely deep, and we are, after all, only human. Perhaps when we struggle to forgive another person, we need to begin not from our own limited capacities, but by considering God's unlimited capacity for mercy... towards us. When someone has broken our

hearts, perhaps we must remember when we broke someone else's heart. Surely we don't have a perfect record. For all the times we have done what we ought not to have done, and have not done what we ought to have done, we have been forgiven immeasurably by a loving, broken heart of an immeasurably merciful god. While many clamor for justice, I believe it is mercy that we collectively need. And when we cannot forgive on our own, then start by asking God to work in and through us to make us forgiving people. After all, Jesus did not live to condemn us... "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:17) I don't think we can live at all well and peaceably if we condemn others.

So what will it be? Forgiven sinners in Heaven? Or forgiven sinners in Hell? I do think we have something to say about that.

Notes:

Opening question from Robert Capon's "Parables of Grace".

Idea regarding "our ability to forgive being limited but God's ability to forgive is not" limited from Walter Wangerin.