

## Wesley United Methodist Church

September 17, 2017

“Throw Away the Calculator.”

Matthew 18:21-35

A certain married couple had many sharp disagreements. Yet somehow the wife always stayed calm and collected. One day her husband commented on his wife's restraint. “When I get mad at you,” he said, “you never fight back. How do you control your anger?” The wife said: “I work it off by cleaning the toilet.” The husband asked: “How does that help?” She said: “I use your toothbrush.”

A motorcycle patrolman suffered a minor accident that put him in the hospital for a couple of days. His injuries had been to his foot and ankle. Then why, he wondered, did he feel what seemed to be a large bandage on his chest? With some effort he was able to pull his hospital gown down far enough so he could examine the bandage and figure out its purpose. When he did, he saw it was indeed a large bandage, the kind that is exceedingly painful to tear off of a hairy chest. On the bandage was written this message: “A gift...from the nurse you gave a ticket to last week.”

Our subject today is forgiveness. Kind of a continuation of last week's sermon when we talked about restoring relationships. How many times must I forgive someone who has hurt me, abused me, exploited me? The common element here is to throw away the calculator when dealing with relationships. However, that's Simon Peter's question. How many times? Would seven times be enough?

Peter thought that he was being generous. After all, the rabbis of his day taught that only three times were required. They said, “Forgive three times, but not the fourth.” That was how they interpreted passages like Amos 1:3 (“For the three crimes of Damascus, and for four. I won't hold back the punishment...”) Peter was taking what the rabbis commanded, multiplying it by two, and adding one more for good measure! Seven times, Peter thought, should be plenty of forgiveness

But it wasn't enough for Jesus. In answer to how many times we should forgive Jesus said, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.” In other words, forgiveness is limitless. This is important because some of you are probably thinking, “That's a lot, seventy times seven. But at least the four hundred ninety-first time, I can let him have it real good.” We miss Jesus' point. There is to be no limit to our forgiveness. Forgiveness is at the heart of Christian faith. We are not to hold grudges, resentments or harbor bitterness. It's a tough teaching, but it's one of Jesus' most important teachings. It is at the center of everything we believe about Christ.

Refusing to forgive can be deadly. That's the first thing we need to see. What is the alternative to refusing to forgive? Isn't it to carry around a feeling of bitterness, of resentment, a simmering hatred for a lifetime? Why would you do that to yourself? Someone has said that harboring resentments is like taking poison and waiting for the other guy to die. Or letting that hatred simmer within us, eating our emotions and our body, it like burning down our house to get rid of rats. C.S. Lewis once observed that he had finally forgiven a man who had been dead for more than thirty years. Imagine carrying negative feelings around you for thirty years. Meanwhile, as often has been noted, the other person is out dancing. Why would you do that to yourself?

When we carry anger and resentment toward someone else, the person we really hurt is ourselves. An immigrant rabbi who was coming to the United States, made this remark, “Before coming to America, I had to forgive Adolf Hitler. I did not want to bring Hitler inside me to my new country.”

We forgive not merely to fulfill some higher law of morality; we do it for ourselves. The first and often the only person to be healed by forgiveness is the person who does the forgiving. Do you understand that? I fear sometimes that we regard forgiveness as something we do for God, or something to do because it's the nice thing to do. All of that is true, of course. But forgiveness is ultimately a gift we give ourselves. Forgiveness is a choice. You do not have to carry around feelings of bitterness, resentment, anger. You can choose to forgive.

The problem of the servant in today's scripture is that he missed the experience of forgiveness altogether. He thought he was getting off the hook and that was the end of it. It never crossed his mind that what was really happening to him was that he was being forgiven from the heart by someone who understood how huge his debt was, but who was willing to let it all go—throwing away the calculator. You see, the debt had become a substitute for the relationship and the debt had to go if they were going to get to know each other again.

That's what the wicked servant missed. When the king forgave him, he figured he had outsmarted the old goat and that the best way to cut his losses was to see that the same thing did not happen to him. When his turn came, he did what he had expected the king to do to him: he grabbed his debtor by the throat and demanded to be paid. He had missed his own forgiveness, so of course he could not forgive anyone else.

You know how the story ends. He gets thrown in jail until he can pay his debt, which amounts to the rest of his life, but his imprisonment is a technicality. The wicked servant was already behind bars, bars of his own making. By refusing to be forgiven and refusing to forgive, he had already created his own little Alcatraz where he sat in solitary confinement with his calculator and kept track of his accounts.

By the end of the parable, Peter thinks he has gotten the message: do unto others or the king will do unto you. Only that is not the message at all. The message of the parable is "Do unto others as the King has *already* done unto you." It's not a matter of earning your forgiveness or letting others off the hook so that you can get off the hook yourself. It is a matter of understanding that you have already been forgiven. There is someone who knows absolutely everything about you, all your good points and your bad ones. This someone has examined your credit rating and knows the chances for repayment are next to nil, so he took the stack of IOUs and tore them to shreds for one reason and one reason only. This someone wants to remain in relationship with you. When someone like that has stopped keeping score on you, you feel foolish keeping score on the people in your own life. Jesus said, "but, I tell you, seventy times seven." This is not to be a burden, not a job, nor a chore. This is a promise, because forgiveness is a way of life. What God knows and we don't yet, is that once we get the hang of it, seventy times seven won't be enough. We'll be so carried away by it that we'll hope it never ends. Amen.