

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 14, 2014

"Up To Seven Times?"

Matthew 18:21-25

Old Joe was dying. For years he'd been at odds with Bill, formerly one of his best friends. Wanting to straighten things out, he sent for Bill to come and see him. When Bill arrived, Joe told him that he was afraid to go into eternity with such bad feelings between them. Then, very reluctantly and with great effort, Joe apologized for things he had said and done. He also assured Bill that he forgave him his offenses.

Everything seemed fine until Bill turned to go. As he walked out of the room, Joe called out after him, "Now, just remember, if I get better, this doesn't count."

In our Gospel reading Simon Peter comes to Jesus and asks, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times..." This is an amazing teaching, if you think about it. Some versions translate this as seventy-seven times, others seventy times seven. Whichever translation is correct, Jesus seems to be saying that forgiveness should be an unlimited resource in our lives. Doesn't Jesus realize how difficult that is? Of course, he does. Imagine how difficult it was for him as he hung on the cross to forgive those who were taunting him. Imagine how difficult it is for him to forgive everyone who has ever betrayed him including you and me. He taught unlimited forgiveness; he practiced unlimited forgiveness. And as he did that, he taught us some critical things about forgiveness.

First of all, he taught us that forgiveness is possible. You and I need to see that. We do not have to be slaves to resentment and anger. Christ can deliver us. He can set us free.

That blessed saint of God, Corrie ten Boom once told of being haunted by a wrong that had once been done to her. She had forgiven that person, but she kept rehashing the incident in her mind and it kept her awake at night.

Finally Corrie cried out to God for help in putting the problem to rest and God answered her prayer. He sent her a kindly Lutheran pastor. Corrie told him her story and the pastor made a simple suggestion. "Up in the church tower," he said, "is a bell which is rung by pulling a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps swinging. First ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.

This was just the advice Corrie needed. She writes, "And it proved to be. There were a few more sleepless moments, but the force had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at the last stopped altogether..."

Maybe there is an incident from your past some hurt, some slight done to you; maybe it's still alive in your heart but if you continue to ask God's help, forgiveness is possible. You don't have to let it haunt you forever.

There is a second thing to be said. Forgiveness is not only possible, it is highly desirable. That damage that we do to ourselves through unresolved anger and resentment is far more deadly than any damage we are likely to inflict on one who has hurt us. Why keep hammering away at yourself? Our hating anyone is like burning our house down to get rid of the rats.

Lack of forgiveness can tear us apart. Someone once noted that a rattlesnake, if cornered, will sometimes become so angry it will bite itself. That is exactly what the harboring of hate and resentment against others is a biting of oneself. We think that we are harming others in holding these negative feelings, but the deeper harm is to ourselves.

Forgiveness is the key to a healthy mind and heart. Forgive someone who has done you a great wrong and you will sleep better at night. Forgive yourself and you will sleep better at night. Forgiveness is the best thing you can do for your body and soul. Booker T. Washington once said: "No man is able to force me so low as to make me hate him."

The Bible says, "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13). Of course, the key is to remember that God has forgiven you. Forgiveness is possible. And it is highly desirable. But even beyond that, from the New Testament standpoint, forgiveness is essential. We dare not ask God's forgiveness for our sins if we are not willing to forgive others.

After cautioning Simon Peter to forgive one who has done him wrong seventy-seven times, Jesus told a parable, quite a humorous parable really, because of the level of exaggeration involved. Jesus told a parable about a man who owed his king ten thousand bags of gold. This is a staggering sum of money. Have you priced gold lately? Someone has estimated that ten thousand bags of gold would today be worth approximately \$8 trillion dollars! We're starting to talk about real money here. So Jesus told about a man who owed the king a sum of \$8 trillion dollars. Someone has estimated that if this man were to work 365 days per year it would require between 164,000 and 274,000 years to earn the money needed to repay such a debt! The king was ready to have the man, his wife, their children and all their possessions sold to satisfy the debt. The man begged on his knees for more time. The Scriptures tell us that the king was moved with compassion and completely forgave the man his debt. What relief! What joy! but wait...you know the rest of the story.

That same man had someone who owed him a debt of a hundred silver coins, a piddling amount in that currency. Do you think he forgave the man who owed him this debt as he had been forgiven? Not on your life. He seized this man by the throat and told him to pay up. And when the fellow did not, he had him thrown into prison. And when the king heard about this, he called this unforgiving man in again. "Here I forgave your debt, should you not have forgiven the debt that was owed to you?"

Jesus asks the same question of us today. You have been forgiven of every sin you have ever committed. You live under the amazing grace which Christ made possible on the cross of Calvary. Can you not find it in your heart to forgive others?

"Forgive us our sins," he taught us to pray, "as we forgive those who sinned against us." Forgiveness is essential not only that we may be forgiven but because forgiveness is a redemptive act. When we forgive, we not only turn an enemy into a friend, but we witness to the faith we profess.

Forgiveness is possible. It is highly desirable because it is for our own best good, as well as for those who have offended us. But even more importantly, forgiveness is essential to our relationship with others and with God.

"How many times may my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" asked Simon Peter. "As many as seven times?" Jesus answered him, "Not up to seven times, but seventy-seven times." We forgive others as much as God has forgiven us.