

Sermon – Bethlehem Lutheran, Kalispell MT
Mark Gravrock
14 September 2014
Pentecost 14
Matthew 18.21-35 (Genesis 50.15-21)

Grace and peace . . .

But what if I can't forgive?

Today's scripture readings are all about forgiveness –
about a God who forgives,
and about a God who calls us to forgive.

I suspect we all agree that forgiveness is a very good thing,

But what if I can't forgive?

Do you have one of those in your life? –
a situation you've never been able to let go of,
a person you've never been able to forgive –
maybe one you've never even wanted to be able to forgive –
someone who hurt you, or hurt someone who matters to you,
so horribly,
perhaps someone who has never shown the slightest bit of remorse.

What if you can't forgive?

Forgiveness for petty things can be hard enough;
how about forgiveness for heinous crimes and insults,
for rape, for years of abuse,
for negligent homicide, for causing financial ruin?
I hope you've never had to struggle with forgiveness for such things,
but I know that some of you have.

What if you can't forgive?

Here is Joseph in our first reading, in Genesis.

Maybe you know his story.

Here it is in briefest outline:

Joseph, one of Jacob's large brood of children by several wives,
Joseph, his daddy's favorite,
Joseph, who knew he was his daddy's favorite,

and loved to strut it in front of his brothers,¹
 Joseph, who, when his brothers finally got the chance –
 far from Daddy’s doting eyes –
 sold him into slavery to some passing merchants,
 doused his fancy clothes in animal blood,
 presented the “evidence” to Daddy
 who naturally concluded
 that his favorite child had been killed by a wild beast,²
 Joseph, re-sold by those merchants to an official in Egypt,³
 and later thrown into prison
 on a trumped-up charge and false evidence,⁴
 Joseph, whom God did not forget,
 even through the very worst of his experiences,
 but raised him up dramatically
 until he was the Egyptian king’s #2 man.⁵
 Joseph, who, when famine gripped the entire region
 and (by Joseph’s guidance) only Egypt had stockpiles of grain,
 Joseph found himself welcoming his own brothers –
 though they did not recognize him –
 when they came to Egypt to buy grain,
 Joseph who, by several twists and turns,
 finally brought his father’s whole family
 to resettle in Egypt under Joseph’s protection.⁶

And now, after long years, Daddy has died,
 and Joseph’s brothers are terrified:
 Yes, he was kind to us as long as Dad was alive.
 He was gracious to us for Dad’s sake.
 But now our buffer is gone.
 What’s to stop Joseph from exacting his revenge on us,
 at long last,
 for what we did to him?

¹ Genesis 37.1-11

² Gen 37.12-35

³ Gen 37.36

⁴ Gen 39

⁵ Gen 40-41

⁶ Gen 42-47

*Let's go tell him that Daddy, on his deathbed,
was begging Joseph to forgive us.*

And they go to Joseph.

They deliver Daddy's made-up request.

They bow themselves down before their powerful brother.

And Joseph weeps.

And the brothers weep, too.⁷

And Joseph says,

Am I in the place of God?⁸

Am I in the place of God?

What an odd thing for Joseph to say!

Am I in the place of God?

This is the heart, by the way, of today's sermon.

The whole thing can be summed up in our anguished question,

But what if I can't forgive?

and Joseph's amazing response:

Am I in the place of God?

Today's gospel reading (from Matthew) picks up from last week:

Jesus has been teaching about community,

about life in the community of his people, his disciples.

What we saw last week was

- first, that the little ones, the vulnerable and powerless, are at the center of Jesus' community,
- that, in fact, it's only by lowering ourselves like little ones that we even enter Jesus' community,
- next, that Jesus is working to help keep us from causing one another to stumble in our faith,
- and then, that he sets up safeguards for how we deal with each other's offenses, safeguards that are designed to protect one another and ultimately restore us to one another,
- and finally, that Jesus promises his own presence in our midst

⁷ Gen 50.15-18

⁸ Gen 50.19

as we work toward healing with one another.

That was last week.

This week, Jesus continues with the topic of community and restoration.

It starts with Peter.

Apparently, what Jesus said last week has been eating at Peter,
so he comes to Jesus with his problem:

**“Lord, if my skunk of a brother sins against me,
how often do I have to forgive?
As many as seven times?”⁹**

Okay, the Bible doesn’t say “skunk of a brother.”

It just says “if my brother (or sister) sins against me.”

But you know what Peter means:

Have you got somebody like that in your life –
someone that you’ve had to deal with and be patient with and forgive,
over and over and over,
and nothing ever changes?

And you know the presumption when we ask Peter’s question,

How many times must I forgive?

What we’re presuming, of course, is that we’ve been in the right,
and our “skunk of a brother” has been doing that thing again,
over and over and over.

That’s what we’re presuming,
and, well, we’ve been right, right?

Jesus’ response to us?

It doesn’t matter which version of the text we’re reading –
whether it’s 77 times or 70 times 7 times –
Jesus’ response is that there is no limit at all!¹⁰

Depending on whom, or what, you’re thinking of this morning,
your heart may already be crying out,

But what if I can’t forgive?

What if it’s just been too much, for too long?

Jesus knows what we’re feeling.

He knows how our guts are screaming out.

⁹ Matthew 18.21

¹⁰ V. 22

And what he does -- is tell a story.

So many of Jesus' stories are cryptic and puzzling.

Not this one.

Its message seems pretty clear!

It's so clear, in fact, that it amounts to a cartoon.

This king is settling accounts with his servants.

It's the day of reckoning.

It's the day when the bills come due.

In comes one debtor –

and here's where this becomes a cartoon:

This guy owes the king *ten thousand talants*.

Your Bible will likely have a footnote,

telling you that one talant was equal to more than 15 years
of a day-laborer's wages.

Do the math:

This man owes the king more than 150,000 years of wages!

We're talking about something like America's national debt.

The best way I know to translate this

is to say that he owed the king a zillion dollars.

So this is already a cartoon:

Who in the world could ever rack up such an astronomical debt?

And we're not talking about a Donald Trump:

We're talking about the king's slave.

What comes next is even more astounding:

After the king first orders the man and his family

to be sold into slavery to pay down the debt,

the man begs for time:

'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'¹¹

(Yeah, right: That's gonna happen!)

And, incredibly, this king has compassion on the guy,

releases him from his obligation,

and cancels the entire debt!¹²

Time for a full stop!

¹¹ v. 26

¹² v. 27

Maybe it's obvious, but let's make it even more obvious:
 Jesus is giving us a snapshot of what our God is truly like!
 If it wasn't already clear, with the king-language,
 that Jesus is talking about God,
 he clinches it by showing us this king's "pity,"
 or better, "compassion."
 Do you ever wonder whether God could possibly forgive you?
 Do you have something in your life that haunts you,
 something that makes you wonder,
How could God ever forgive me for that?
 Maybe a cartoon is the clearest way to say it:
 Our God can and does forgive your zillion-dollar debt!
 That's why Jesus went to the cross:
 Jesus on the cross is God carrying on God's own self,
 in God's own person,
 everything you are,
 everything you've done,
 everything you ever struggle with,
 all of it!
 All ten-thousand talants worth of it –
 cancelled:
 understood, compassioned, released, cancelled, forgiven!
We fall before this king and cry out,
Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything!
 and the God of Jesus Christ says,
*No you won't – there's no way in heaven or hell that you can! –
 but I forgive.
 I forgive it all!*

The cartoon continues:

This utterly incredible display of forgiveness,
 this scandalous national-debt-sized cancellation of debt,
 has absolutely *no effect* on this skunk!
 His response is to go right out,
 throttle his fellow-servant who owes him two bits,¹³
 pay no attention whatsoever when this other pleads –

¹³ Actually 100 denarii, 100 days' worth of a day-laborer's wage.

in exactly the same words –
‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you’
 and toss the guy in prison for his debt!

It’s no surprise that the others in the king’s entourage
 are shocked by the insensitivity of this guy.
 What Jesus’ story actually says, stops me in my tracks:
 Literally:

**When his fellow slaves saw what had happened,
 they were deeply pained, deeply grieved,
 and they went and reported¹⁴**

This is the effect of our unforgiveness on a community –
 not only unforgiveness on such a gross scale,
 but all of our failure and refusal to forgive:

The community is deeply pained, deeply grieved.

And then comes the final scene,
 where the king himself is outraged and grieved,
 and compassion turns into wrath,
 forgiveness is taken back,
 and the zillion-dollar debt, once fully cancelled,
 is now un-cancelled, unforgiven!¹⁵

It would be nice to leave it there –
 to leave this as a cartoon,
 clearly exaggerated in order to make a point –
 but Jesus has to add one more sentence,
 a sentence that stands outside the story:

**So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you –
 that is: deliver you over to the torturers
 until you should pay back the 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.¹⁶**

Are you joking, Lord?
 Surely you can’t mean that!

¹⁴ V. 31

¹⁵ Vv. 32-34.

¹⁶ V. 35

If I won't forgive someone else, you'll take back my forgiveness?
How can you mean that?!

If forgiveness can be taken back, how can it be forgiveness?

If nothing else, this story makes it awfully clear
that forgiveness is not optional for Christians,
that our discipleship includes forgiveness,
that part of what it means to be Jesus' disciples, to be Christians,
is that we shall forgive.

This is not an option!

It's already there in the Lord's Prayer,
which we've been praying over and over,
day after day, week after week:

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

Literally, in Matthew's version, it's:

Forgive us our sins,

as we ourselves have forgiven those who sin against us.

Do we want to pray that?

This is not an option: It's the way of life for people in Jesus Christ.

But what if I can't forgive?

I know I'm supposed to, but what if I can't?

What if I've tried and tried,
and just can't bring myself to forgive?

Let me offer three helps, and a picture.

The first help is to ask, *what is forgiveness and what isn't it?*

- Forgiveness is not saying, "It's all right."
Our wounds do damage each other, and it's not "all right."
Forgiveness takes the damage seriously.
- Forgiveness does not mean that we'll be best friends again.
Forgiveness is essential, if there's going to be reconciliation,
but forgiveness itself does not mean that we are reconciled.
- Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting:
God is the only one who is capable of forgiving-and-forgetting.
We still live with the memory.
- Forgiveness does not erase consequences:

When Jesus forgave his killers, he still died on the cross.

- Forgiveness does not necessarily restore trust:
If I have stolen from you repeatedly, and you forgive me,
you're still not going to put me in charge of your finances:
That would be just foolish!
- Forgiveness does not mean that you stay in an abusive relationship
or that you let yourself continue to be walked on.

Well, then, what is forgiveness?

What does it mean to forgive?

To forgive is to let go.

To forgive is to renounce my claim on you.

To forgive is to let go of any sense that you owe me something.

To forgive is to say – in the heart or out loud –

I release you from this.

I will not hold this over you.

I let go of my claim on you.

To forgive is to release this thing into God's hands.

That's the first help: to know what forgiveness isn't and what it is.

The second help is to place myself into Jesus' cartoon.

Jesus tells it,

to shake Peter out of the place where he thinks he stands,
and to show him the truth.

He tells it to help me see the truth about myself, before God and others:

You may not see yourself as a zillion-dollar debtor,

and it's not my job to somehow make you feel guilty like that.

Many of us go through the first half of life

building up a sense of ourselves as faithful, appropriate,
responsible, successful –
more or less, anyway.

It's often in the second half of life that the cracks start to show:

Sometimes they're obvious failures that everyone around us sees, too.

Sometimes they're the cracks we discover in our own souls,
in the heart of relationship,

in our failure to grow the way we want to
and think we should.

The more we discover the truth about ourselves,

the more we see the magnitude of our debt.

And – you’ll know it in your own souls:

If you have begun to see the cracks in your own facade,
if you have begun to see

how much you need God’s compassion and forgiveness,
if you have begun to discover how amazingly and completely

God has forgiven you in Jesus Christ,
to that extent, you know inside yourself
that finally you cannot not forgive –

as Jesus says,

*Those who have been forgiven much, love much.*¹⁷

That’s what Jesus’ cartoon is for – and that’s the second help:

To help me see how deeply I’m indebted to my gracious Savior,
and how incomprehensible it is for me not to forgive.

But what if I still can’t forgive?

What if the pain and the memory are just too great?

Here’s the third help, and maybe it’s the best one:

When Joseph’s brothers beg for forgiveness,

Joseph weeps, and he says,

Am I in the place of God?

It’s God’s place to hold Joseph’s brothers to their crime against Joseph.

It’s God’s place to release them and forgive them.

Joseph does forgive his brothers,

in the sense that he refuses to take revenge upon them,
and promises to care for their families.

But in another sense,

Joseph leaves all questions of revenge or forgiveness to God:

Am I in the place of God?

When I can’t seem to forgive,

when I can’t seem to change my heart,

when I can’t seem to let go,

maybe that’s the best place to begin:

Am I in the place of God?

When I can’t seem to release the thing, that’s where I can begin:

¹⁷ Luke 7.47

Release it into the only hands where it's safe:
 into the hands that were crucified
 for me
 and for the one I'm having trouble forgiving.

Three helps and a picture.

Here's the picture.

It speaks to that terrible last verse of the gospel reading.

*Lord, if I can't or won't forgive someone else,
 will you actually take back my forgiveness?*

Then how can it be forgiveness?

If I don't forgive, will you refuse to forgive me?

The trouble I have with that

is that it seriously undercuts the sheer gift of forgiveness
 that Jesus gives us at the cross!

So here's the picture:

Picture a water pipe:

water flowing into the pipe freely
 from an ever-flowing spring of fresh water.

But now picture a plug on the other end of the pipe
 so that no water can come out:

How will the water from the freely-flowing spring
 keep on flowing into the pipe,
 if it's plugged up at the other end?

How will I experience the forgiveness of Jesus,
 if forgiveness won't flow out the other end?

We can make it more graphic yet:

Let's make this a sewer pipe.

If the exit end of the pipe is plugged up,
 how much cleansing water is going to flush through the system?
 And what do you suppose the pipe stays full of?

I'd probably better stop

before we move too far into images
 of Jesus as Liquid Plumber or whatever.

You get the picture.

The point is that, in Jesus' gift, forgiveness becomes an organic process:

The more we take Jesus' cartoon seriously,

the more I see the truth about my need and Jesus' gift,
the more freely his living water is able to flow through.

What if I can't forgive?

Ultimately, that's the reality for all of us!

We can't!

Am I in the place of God?

Turn to the source.

Give it to the source.

Let it flow.

Amen