

I talk a fair bit about being a manuscript preacher and how if I wasn't, I would end up going down a bunch of different trails and get us all lost. This week we are going to go down a bunch of trails with the hope that we don't get lost. As I was working with today's scriptures, an odd fact hit me. Most Sunday's we end up joining in on the scriptures in the middle of a conversation. That's definitely true in today's passage. Peter is asking a question that's pretty loaded: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? I'm speaking hypothetically, Lord. Of course." So, where did this conversation start? What got us to this moment? /

The conversation started at the beginning of the chapter, when some unnamed disciples asked Jesus a different (but probably related question): Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus gave what must have felt like a completely ridiculous and not at all satisfactory answer. This little child, Jesus said, enlisting the nearest kid. Unless you change and become like this little child, you won't even (1)

get past the bouncer at the door of the kingdom of heaven. (pause) I envision a large angel with tattoo's on their wings crossed over their chest, but that's one of those trails I was telling you about. /

Anyway, the Big Question behind all these individual questions is this: what does it mean, again, to be in community with Jesus Christ? What is his vision for life in community, which, for us, translates to, life in the church? Here it begins with a question about who's the greatest and moves into a conversation about what we do when things go wrong, and we hurt one another. And that's how we end up here. /

When someone hurts us, how forgiving do we have to be? Another way of putting that might be, What's the least forgiving we can get away with being? Peter wonders if forgiving the same person seven times is enough. Then can we be done with it? Will that do? /

Jesus' answer is very bad news for the legalists among us. Seven times? Ha! Try seventy-seven times (that's what it says in our English translation). Or even, seventy times seven (that's what it says in the original Greek). Which comes out to 490 times. I know you math people are impressed... In other words, Jesus gives him an answer (2)

that reminds me of my parents, who'd say, "Oh, are we keeping score?" with a dark air to their response. Jesus is not interested in our attempts to keep score, because his answer amounts to: Don't bother with the numbers. Just keep forgiving. /

Then Jesus tells the parable of the king and the slave. I'll summarize it for you: The king forgives an enormous, insurmountable, life-crushing debt on the part of the slave. The slave, on the other hand, does not forgive a relatively small debt he is owed by another slave, but has him sent to prison. The king gets wind of it and is enraged that someone who could be forgiven so much would refuse to forgive so little. So, the king has the first slave sent off to prison to be tortured. /

As parables go, this is a grim one. And I don't know about you, but I find the presence of slavery in the text to be very troubling. We often wave those kinds of concerns aside when we read scripture, saying, "Well, in that culture..." But there's a reason why we, in this culture, have outlawed slavery, and it has to do with Jesus. We don't believe that people should own other people, in part, because Jesus is very clear that the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. We (3)

believe that slavery violates the dignity of human beings, all of whom we believe are made in the image of God. But perhaps the best thing I can say about slavery in this parable is: It made me notice the presence of slavery in another story from Genesis. (pause) /

Remember Joseph? That favorite son of Jacob? The one for whom his father made the amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. (That's not going to make sense if you haven't seen the musical, but again I go down odd trails.) The one who didn't know how to handle being the favorite but was kind of a brat. The one who hugely irritated his brothers by announcing he'd had dreams in which everyone, sun, moon, stars, parents, brothers... everyone bowed down to him? That Joseph. Well, we join Joseph in the middle of his story as well. Joseph's punishment for irritating his brothers had been that they sold him into slavery (and then lied to their father about it.) Eventually, though, Joseph turned out to have some talent, he totally landed on his feet, and he ended up in Egypt, right-hand-man to the Pharaoh, and second only to him in power. / (4)

Much later, his brothers have come to Egypt looking for food—economic refugees, they’re everywhere the bible—and Joseph, after putting them through their paces for a bit, finally admits who he is, and they have a tearful reunion, and it’s all very sweet and emotional. It truly seems as if all is forgiven. /

Then, their father Jacob dies. ‘Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?”’ (Gen. 50:15) /

So, they approach Joseph, and they say that Jacob would have wanted Joseph to forgive them. And they beg Joseph’s forgiveness. Finally, they say these words: “We are here as your slaves.” The brothers who sold Joseph into slavery, in the end, offer themselves to him as slaves. This is what is called, making reparation. Making amends. They ask forgiveness with their lips; they show contrition with their actions. (pause) /

Joseph’s response is beautiful. Don’t be afraid, he says. “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good...” (5)

Joseph has come to the conclusion that God ensured the survival of the covenant community by placing Joseph in Egypt, where he would be able to aid his family—as well as the entire population of Egypt—during the time of famine. God intended it all for good. /

The story of Joseph and his brothers illustrates a couple of commonsense truths. Forgiveness is easier to give when, first, we can see a greater good arise from ash heap of bad actions; and second, when those asking forgiveness demonstrate their sincerity with their actions. “We are here as your slaves.” That statement of humility shows that the brothers of Joseph understand the gravity of what they have done to him. /

When we read this story, I don't think we have the liberty of forgetting that institution of slavery flourished in our land from 1619 to 1867, nearly 250 years, and then there was another hundred-plus years of systematic denial of human rights to people of color. The aftereffects of slavery are very much with us. It's complicated on our best of days to be sure, and we are left with work to do to avoid further harm to individuals, families, and communities. / (6)

The point I am trying to make is that there are some circumstances in which forgiveness is easier. And there are others in which it is harder. Maybe it would be good to be clear about certain things. /

Forgiveness **does not** mean: Remaining in a situation where you allow a person to continue to harm you. Forgiveness **does** mean: Creating the space for your own healing from the harm done to you. /

Forgiveness **does not** mean condoning harmful actions. Forgiveness **does** mean undergoing a change of heart about the perpetrator of the action (that is, no longer seeking retribution). /

Forgiveness **does not** mean excusing harmful actions. Forgiveness **does** mean holding the perpetrator accountable for their actions. /

Forgiveness **does not necessarily** mean the restoration of relationships. But if the person who has caused the harm expresses an understanding of the harm they've caused and offers, in some way, to make amends... it may. (pause) /

Okay, let's get back to this morning's scripture. The figure at the heart of the parable is the king. The one who is so completely (7)

forgiving in the beginning, but who revokes his forgiveness when he sees that the one, he has forgiven, refuses to forgive someone else. And though we are discouraged from turning parables into allegories, it's common to assume the king in this parable is a stand-in for God. I don't believe that allegory holds up. I think the enraged king looks a little more like us, than it looks like God. We are imperfect. That's a given. But God's love is not—I repeat—is not conditional. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. They are fresh every morning. (pause) /

Alright. We are going to try a guided meditation from pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes this morning. I will do my best to guide you...

Get comfortable:

Settle and breathe deeply. ... Close your eyes if you like. ...

Rest in the peace of God. ...

Bring to mind a person you haven't forgiven. ...

The two of you stand together. ...

Jesus comes and looks at the two of you (8)

with great kindness in his eyes. ...

He embraces the other. ...

Perhaps there are words, ...

though likely you can't hear them. ...

Perhaps there are tears. ...

He holds them for a long time. ...

*They release the embrace, look at each other
and smile. ...*

Jesus turns to you

with great kindness in his eyes. ...

He embraces you. ...

Perhaps there are words. ...

(What might they be?) ...

He holds you a long time. ...

*He releases you and looks at you
and smiles. ...*

You look at the person you want to forgive. ... (9)

What is in your heart? ...

Tell them. ...

Jesus blesses you and leaves you

with your new heart. (long Pause) /

Thanks for trying that with me. (pause) /

///// I don't think the enraged king who sentences the slave to be tortured is God. It sounds more like the sentence we might pass on ourselves in our hurt and anger. God is the one who creates us in love, redeems us in love, and sustains us in love. God is the one whose forgiveness draws us out of the prison of ourselves and shows us what freedom might look like. God is the one whose forgiveness and mercy are not limited or countable but are fresh every morning. God forgives, and invites us to forgive, not out of fear, but out of love. Thanks be to God for that. Amen. /////