

Sermon: Counting Forgiveness

9/13/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Strike one...strike two...strike three...you're out. It's not just something we say in baseball. It's also how Christians have long interpreted last week's Gospel lesson, the one right before today's reading. You know, the one that tells us, if another member of the church sins, you should go to them in private and implore them to confess and repent. If they refuse, strike one. Then you should bring one or two witnesses to try and convince the person. If they continue to refuse, strike two. Finally, you should speak to them in front of the entire church. If they refuse still, strike three, they're out; out of the church, that is, and out of right relationship with God.

For first-century Jews, like Jesus and the disciples, "three strikes and you're out" was common practice. You see, Jews were required to forgive their neighbor three times. After that, there was no need for further forgiveness. They could judge and hold grudges without fear of surrendering their righteousness. "I wonder if Jesus expects the same," I imagine Peter thinking to himself. "Then again, forgiveness has always been important to him. When I ask him, I'm going to choose a much higher number, one that demonstrates just how forgiving I am. Lord," he says, after finally approaching Jesus, "how about seven times? Is that enough?" "Enough," responds Jesus with an air of frustration in his voice, "you think that seven is enough? No, try seventy-seven instead."

Seventy-seven, or according to some translations, seventy times seven, that is how often Jesus expects us to forgive one another. Jesus gave Peter this answer because he wanted to make clear that we are expected to forgive more times than we can count. And yet, simply by giving a number, I imagine he knew that we would begin to count nonetheless. So upon correcting Peter,

he began a parable meant to impress on Peter and the disciples just how abundant forgiveness should be.

“The kingdom of heaven,” Jesus begins, “is like a king who wishes to settle accounts with his slaves.” At the time, most slavery was based not on race, but on conquest. When people were conquered, they were often enslaved by the victors and assigned work that utilized their intelligence and skills. What this meant was that some slaves were involved in the business and personal affairs of their masters; as evidenced in Rome, where slaves were known to serve as trusted counselors to the emperor. In today’s Gospel passage, it appears that a slave has assumed a similar position to the king. At some point, the king gave the slave access to a significant amount of his fortune. Now, the time has come for each of the king’s slaves to settle their debts. For the slave we just mentioned, in particular, this posed a significant problem.

You see, the slave owed the king 10,000 talents. How much was a talent, you might be asking? Well, a denarius was worth a day’s pay, and a talent was worth somewhere between six and ten thousand denarii. Ten thousand talents, depending on whom you cite, was worth 25 million dollars at a minimum, in today’s money, and potentially into the billions. Whatever amount you choose, it is clear that 10,000 talents was an incredible sum, more than the slave could even dream of repaying. So he fell on his knees and began to beg. “Please, my Lord,” he implored, “don’t sell me and my family. Have patience with me and I will pay you back every cent I owe you. Somehow, I will, I promise.”

The king knew that it was an empty promise. There was no way that the slave could ever repay the debt. On account of his actions, he deserved to be sold and lose everything. But for some reason the king took pity on him, released the slave from his punishment, and forgave his debts. The slave had been given a second chance, a chance that he did not deserve. As he walked

home, shaking his head in disbelief, the man traveled past one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii. Rather than show him the same mercy, though, he grabbed the slave by the throat, his eyes filled with anger, and said, “Pay me what you owe.” A hundred denarii might not be 10,000 talents, but it still comprised a considerable sum, much more than the man could repay. So he fell down and pleaded, “Have patience with me and I will pay you, I promise,” echoing the words the king had heard just a short while earlier. Except this time, the words were met with cold indifference. The man was thrown into prison, where he would be forced to work off his debt. As you might imagine, news of his imprisonment greatly distressed the other slaves and enraged the king.

Upon hearing the news, the king summoned the first man and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all your debt because you pleaded with me. Why did you not show your fellow slave the same mercy? On account of your wickedness, your debt has been restored and you will be punished until the day that it is paid back in full. For the rest of your life.” “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you,” Jesus concludes the parable, “if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

With these final words, Jesus makes clear who we are in the story. We are not the king, who freely and graciously forgives, nor are we the other slaves, seeking to hold one another accountable. We are the slave who owes 10,000 talents, more than we can ever even dream of repaying. We deserve to be punished for our debts, for all the times that we have sinned against God and our neighbor. But we have been offered forgiveness. Jesus, our Lord and King, has extended to us and every other person this gracious gift, not because we have earned it, but because he loves us. And what he asks that we do in return is extend this same gift to others. Let’s be honest, though, judging and holding grudges comes naturally to us. It’s like scratching

an itch. Before a few months ago, we would have scratched our nose at the grocery store without a second thought. Now, we do everything we can to resist the urge, making the itch all the more annoying. We long to scratch it, because scratching it comes naturally. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is much more difficult. It is something we have to learn and practice, like a sport or a musical instrument, over and over again, until it becomes a habit, until it becomes a part of who we are.

When we forgive someone else, when we offer them forgiveness that comes from our heart, we let go of the anger, pain, and frustration that we feel towards them. We stop judging and holding grudges, and instead let that weight be lifted off our shoulders. We do this because of the forgiveness that God has shown us, because of how God's forgiveness has changed us and continues to shape us. The more we forgive, the more we come to accept that there is no limit on forgiveness, because there is no limit to God's forgiveness. And so we stop counting, but not caring. The reason why the king so swiftly punished the slave in today's Gospel lesson is that he made a mockery of the king's forgiveness. His cold and cruel actions towards the other slave demonstrated that he had learned nothing and that no change had occurred in his life. Yes, we are called to forgive others from our heart more times than we can count. Not, though, in such a way that leads to us being abused or taken advantage of. The sad, hard truth is that forgiveness will not always lead to reconciliation. Sometimes, we will need to separate ourselves from a person and their behavior, because only by doing so can we truly let go and experience the healing that comes from forgiving them.

Forgiveness is and should always remain a powerful thing, and not just for us. On June 17, 2015, a young man entered Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The church, one of the oldest black churches in the United States and a part of our Methodist family

(yes, the M in AME stands for Methodist), was in the midst of bible study. For some time, the man sat next to the pastor, participating in the discussion. Then, as they began to pray, he stood up, pulled a gun from his fanny pack, and began to shoot. That day, the self-avowed white supremacist killed nine people and injured three more, all because of the color of their skin. Just two days later, members of their families did something that I'm not sure I could do if I were in their shoes: they forgave him. News of their forgiveness spread in newspapers and on websites, much like news of the ungrateful slave spread among his fellow slaves and finally back to the king. Except this time, what was seen and heard was a testament to what it means to follow Jesus; for in that act, they showed the world that living and loving like Jesus means forgiving like Jesus.

And so the question facing us is this: are you ready to stop counting and begin forgiving like our Lord and King? Hear the good news: in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven! We are all forgiven! Glory to God. Amen.