



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“FORGIVING FROM THE HEART”

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 18:21-35

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC, by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, September 14, 2008.

We all know what it feels like to be mistreated. Sometimes it's just a few offensive words or a nasty comment spoken our way. Other times it happens when someone dents our car in the parking lot and doesn't even bother to leave a note. Some types of mistreatment can be much worse and involve physical and emotional abuse. Hurt feelings can arise not only for things that people have done to us, but also for the actions that they have left undone: the phone call that was not made when someone was in need; the card that was not sent. Feelings of pain, anger, and resentment begin to grow within us. How more painful do the feelings get when the hurt is not caused by some stranger in public, but instead by someone in the church?

Just over the past few months several members of First Scots have shared with me how the actions of others in the church have caused feelings of pain and hurt in their lives, impacting their own journeys of faith. How appropriate is Peter's question to Jesus? Peter asks, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter knew that Jewish tradition stated that three pardons were all that anyone deserved or had to give. So predicting that Jesus might expand on the Jewish tradition, Peter decides to be generous and answers his own question with a "seven." Peter has to be feeling pretty good about himself at this point in the Gospel. He had walked on water, been told that he was the rock on which Jesus was building the church, and seen the transfiguration. But even Peter couldn't have predicted Jesus' response: "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Another possible translation for this number is "seventy times seven" or four hundred ninety times. Either way there is a lot of forgiving and too much counting! And that is exactly Jesus' point. Susan Pendleton Jones wrote in the *Christian Century*, "Jesus answers Peter by telling him not to assume that you can count how many times you offer forgiveness and then be done with it. Forgiveness must become a practice -- a commitment -- that is to be sustained and renewed each day throughout our lives. It is not a single action, feeling or thought. Forgiveness must become an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with God and with others."¹ Even when Peter asks Jesus how generous he should be with forgiving others, his focus is on limits. Peter asks his question quantitatively while Jesus answers qualitatively: there should be no limit on our forgiveness of others. If we are counting, then we haven't forgiven someone at all. Instead we are simply biding our time.

I don't know about you, but forgiving somebody after being wronged is sometimes tough for me to do. When I was in college my car was totaled in a rear end collision, and the other driver was the one at fault. He didn't see that the light was red until right before he slammed into my car. Thankfully, I wasn't injured and while I was upset that I had lost my car, I realized that the other driver didn't mean to hit my car; it just happened. However, weeks later I passed by him at a local movie theater. I didn't recognize him, however, he said to me with a smirk and a laugh, "Didn't I wreck your car?"

¹ Jones, Susan Pendleton, "Forgiven and Forgiving," *Christian Century*, August 25-September 1, 1999. [<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=593>], September 12, 2008.

Boy, did that make me mad! Did he really have to say something like that? Forgiving someone who has hurt you can be difficult, and I am certain that many of you have your own stories and experiences of mistreatment with which I cannot even begin to relate.

So what does it mean to forgive? In Matthew 18 when Peter asks about forgiveness and when the king forgives the servant, forgiveness is understood as the canceling of a debt. This definition reminds us of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." When someone is forgiven, the debt owed is canceled. Forgiveness also means that a person doesn't let sinful behaviors of the past determine how he acts and feels in the present, whether these are things that this person has done or others have done to him.² And forgiveness also involves refusing to hurt the one who hurt you. And forgiveness certainly isn't easy.

Jesus knows that, so he continues his response to Peter by telling a parable: "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made." The beginning of this parable would have certainly caught the ear of those listening to Jesus, who would have viewed ten thousand talents as an unpayable debt and something that was as much as the fabled riches of Egyptian and Persian kings. And what does the king do? Not only does he release the servant, but he also forgives his entire debt.

After having this death to life experience of forgiveness, one would have expected this servant to have at the least been somewhat forgiving with others. Instead as this servant leaves the king's presence, he happens upon a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii or the equivalent of three month's wages or one five hundred thousandth³ of the debt that he had just been forgiven. And he seizes the other servant by the throat and throws him in prison. Let me put this in perspective. The first servant was forgiven a debt of thirty million dollars and then threw his fellow servant into prison over a sixty-dollar debt. Even our ears pick up on those numbers!

And soon enough the king hears about this servant's actions and again summons him and says, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And the king hands the servant over to be tortured until he can pay his entire debt. Because this debt is too large to be paid, the servant will be tortured for the rest of his life. What a parable!

So how are we to interpret all of this? Jesus' first response to Peter tells us that we are to forgive others. His parable explains why. When the king decides to forgive the servant of his unpayable debt, we are reminded of the forgiveness that God freely gives to us through Jesus Christ. Not one of us could pay the debt of our sin by ourselves, but God forgives us still. And just as God has forgiven our unpayable debt, we are to forgive the debts that are owed to us by others. If we truly receive the extravagant forgiveness that God offers us through Jesus Christ, in response we offer that forgiveness to others, because we realize the direct relationship between forgiving others and being forgiven.

Like any good parable that can be understood allegorically, this one has its limitations and questions. If the king can take back his forgiveness, can God do the same? Would God really torture us indefinitely if we were unable to forgive? For me, this is where the parable and the allegory split.

² Stoffregen, Brian P., "Matthew 18.21-35, Proper 19 – Year A," *CrossMarks Christian Resources*. [<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt18x21.htm>], September 12, 2008.

³ Markquart, Edward F., "Series A, Gospel Analysis: Forgiveness: Seven Times Seventy," *Sermons from Seattle*. [http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_seven_times_seventyGA.htm], September 12, 2008.

The king, in an effort to retain his earthly power and honor, chooses to torture the servant forever; he has to keep up his image. His unexpected forgiveness turns to anger and revenge. The question for us then becomes, can our own disobedience nullify God's work through Jesus Christ, God's forgiveness? And we answer that question ourselves with our own understanding of the sovereignty of God. In-Yong Lee writes, "In the last analysis, what is at stake is human forgiveness, which is preceded and empowered by God's forgiveness, but which at the same time solidifies God's forgiveness."⁴ We can only choose God, because God first chose us. We learn to forgive others, because God forgives us.

But what about situations where the perpetrator does not offer repentance and where there is no acknowledgement that a wrong has been done? What about murder, hate crimes, sexual and physical abuse and other horrific experiences that leave victims and survivors in ruin? I won't pretend to have walked a step in these shoes, and I imagine that those who are having those experiences can certainly add much to our conversation. But even in the most awful situations, Jesus' call for forgiveness remains the same. However, in those cases the forgiveness isn't as much for the sake of the perpetrator, but instead for the well being of the victim. Through the process of forgiveness, the victim may experience healing which can remove the inner turmoil and desire for retaliation. There can be hope that the forgiveness offered may lead a perpetrator to repent, just as God's love brings us to our knees.

Susan Jones offers this account of forgiveness:

Sister Helen Prejean, in her book *Dead Man Walking*, tells the story of Lloyd LeBlanc, a Roman Catholic layman, whose son was murdered. When he arrived in the field with the sheriff's deputies to identify his son, LeBlanc immediately knelt by his boy's body and prayed the Lord's Prayer. When he came to the words: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," he realized the depth of the commitment he was making. "Whoever did this, I must forgive them," he later told Prejean. Though it has been difficult not to be overcome by bitterness and feelings of revenge that well up from time to time, LeBlanc said that each day, for the rest of his life, forgiveness must be prayed for and struggled for and won.⁵

In our lives as well, forgiveness must be prayed for and struggled for and won.

In-Yong Lee shares this story in *Christian Century*:

Yang-Won Son, one of the great martyrs in Korea, made grace real. Almost all his ministry was centered on the spiritual and material care of the residents of leper colonies. He resisted bowing down to the Japanese emperor, and suffered six years of imprisonment and cruel treatment. Three years after the 1945 liberation of Korea, the communist insurrection ravaged the country. Son's two teenaged sons were shot to death by the communist rioters when they witnessed to their Christian faith and rejected communism. Instead of being engulfed by hatred and revengeful thoughts, however, Son forgave the shooter, petitioned for his release from the death penalty, and adopted him as his son.⁶

⁴ Lee, In-Yong, "Jesus Math," *Christian Century*, September 6, 2005. [<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3251>], September 12, 2008.

⁵ Jones, Susan Pendleton, "Forgiven and Forgiving," *Christian Century*, August 25-September 1, 1999. [<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=593>], September 12, 2008.

⁶ Lee, In-Yong, "Jesus Math," *Christian Century*, September 6, 2005. [<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3251>], September 12, 2008.

No matter how hard we try, ultimately we all fail to be as merciful and forgiving as God calls us to be. However, that certainly shouldn't stop us from trying. And in fact, our own shortcomings with regard to forgiveness remind us of our constant need to be forgiven and the God who forgives us abundantly through Jesus Christ. May we offer that forgiveness to others, especially those in our family of faith.