

“Reconciling Love”

Romans 14: 1-12, Matthew 18: 21-35

13th Sunday after Pentecost/A, September 11, 2011

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This is the time of year when television networks woo us with trailers for the season premiers of our favorite programs (I admit I am a Grey’s Anatomy junky), or for new series. I saw a commercial for a new program on ABC called Revenge. File this under the category “what will they think of next?” A young woman returns to the Hamptons to seek revenge for the wrong that years ago was done to her family. She says, “This is not a story about forgiveness. Someone has to pay.” Someone has to pay is repeated again and again throughout the promo. Forgiveness does not sell. Retribution does. If the story were about radical forgiveness, no one would watch (unless it was shown on Public Television.) We would not likely tune in to watch a daughter reconcile with those who killed her family and destroyed her reputation. But revenge, that is destined to be a huge hit.

“Someone has to pay,” is a sentiment to which many people can relate. The notion that someone has to pay can lead us to destroy relationships, enter into prolonged warfare, or do something foolish that endangers oneself or one’s future. It is easy to imagine a murderer receiving the death penalty. It is easy to find ourselves dance in the streets upon hearing of the death of Osama Bin Laden. It is easy to justify sending troops to a foreign country to eradicate terrorists. It is easy to suspect our Muslim brothers of wrongdoing simply because they are Muslim. What is not so easy is to forgive as Jesus teaches us to forgive.

It is astounding that the gospel lesson for this morning is Jesus teaching the disciples about his radical concept of forgiveness. I see this as a sign of divine providence. It is an appropriate word for us to hear as we mark the 10th anniversary of the attacks on September 11th, 2001. Peter comes to Jesus seeking clarity on what seems to be a simple question. When a brother or sister does something wrong, how many times are we expected to forgive them? One could imagine forgiving a person one, two perhaps even three times. Peter knows Jesus well enough by now. He offers to forgive someone seven times thinking this might be the kind of extravagant gesture of mercy Jesus would suggest. Jesus’ response surprises Peter. According to Jesus we are not expected to forgive someone seven times, but seventy times seven times. This is way beyond what Peter was expecting.

That is the point Jesus is trying to make. The exact number is not important. In fact, the number Jesus gives is absurd. Whatever the number, we are to keep forgiving, without counting or keeping score. If you keep track, it is not really forgiveness at all. If we forgive someone one, two even three times and nothing changes or they do not respond as we would hope, we are not to give up. Forgiveness has no “three strikes and you are out” rule. There should be no limit to our desire to forgive.

To reinforce the lesson, Jesus tells this parable. Note again the absurd exaggeration. A servant owes the king an immeasurable amount of money. The amount Jesus is talking about is Warren Buffetesque, in other words, it is like saying a gazillion dollars. Regardless of the sum, the king is willing to forgive this outrageous debt and set the servant free. The servant then meets up with a person who owes him a miniscule amount of money in comparison and refuses to forgive his debt. The king finds out about this lack of mercy and rescinds his offer of forgiveness and has the servant thrown in jail. Jesus uses hyperbolic language here to teach Peter and us about the true nature of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is more than something we offer once and never again. Forgiveness is a spiritual practice. Forgiveness is to become a way of life. Peter still thinks quantitatively, calculating how many times is sufficient. Jesus is teaching us how to live qualitatively, beyond our ability to calculate, with the offer of limitless forgiveness. This is what God is like. God does not forsake us no matter what we do. God does not stop loving us no matter how estranged we feel from God. God does not stop forgiving us even when we deny this forgiveness. Jesus teaches that as his disciples we are to do the same.

There is a direct connection between receiving forgiveness and forgiving others. We seek the courage and the strength to forgive every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." This is our prayer, our deepest desire, and yet, we are not able to fulfill this desire without the help of the Holy Spirit. Left to our nature human devises, we are more likely to lash out from the darkness of revenge. It is Jesus that teaches us a more excellent way; a way of peace and reconciliation.

In her book *The Pearl Is in the Oyster* Marilyn Cram Donahue tells the story of a neighbor who had ritualized her resentment. Whenever a visitor came for a cup of tea or coffee, she would pour the drinks and then reach for an old and battered plastic sugar bowl. Then, apologetically, she would tell her story of the beautiful bone china bowl that her mother had owned, but that her sister had taken when her mother died and they divided up her possessions. She had never forgiven her sister, and had turned her bitterness into a daily routine that kept it fresh and growing.¹ When we refuse to let go of resentments or anger or pain, we become trapped. It is tempting to become defined by our wounds. This seems to be a universal human trait. This is why this teaching about forgiveness is so difficult to hear. We can not fully receive forgiveness if we are not willing to offer it to others as well; forgive us our debts as *we* forgive the debts of others.

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

¹ John Van de Laar, "The Injustice of Limitless Forgiveness," from *Sacradise*, September 5, 2011.

time to time, LeBlanc said that each day, for the rest of his life, forgiveness must be prayed for and struggled for and won.² This is no easy task. I have trouble forgiving people for minor transgressions. Imagine forgiving the man who murdered your son, or the terrorists that murdered your wife, or the drunk driver that took a father from their children? We are only able to forgive in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

This practice of forgiveness is a daily challenge. When we have been wounded it is easy to stay trapped in that dark place. When our attempts to forgive have been rebuffed it is easy to walk away and give up. The path of forgiveness and reconciliation is challenging, but not impossible. As we remember the events of September 11, 2001 it is tempting to be defined by our wounds. What happened that day was unprecedented. The terror attacks left a gaping hole in the spirit and psyche of American that perhaps may never fully heal. It is hard to imagine anyone forgiving the men who perpetrated such heinous acts upon innocent people. If we can not forgive, we can never move forward. If we allow the fear such terror unleashed to overrule our sense of freedom, we remain trapped. As challenging as it may seem, forgiving even our enemies as we have been forgiven is the only way to peace.

Forgiveness is challenging, but not impossible. Offering forgiveness does not mean that we forget. It means we extend to another the extravagant gift that we have received, freely and unmerited from God. Eugene Peterson, in his version of John 20:23 in *The Message* drives this point home:

"If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. *If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?*"

John Van de Laar says, "This may not be what we want to hear today, but the truth is, if we stubbornly choose to hang on to our wounds, if we insist on using an old beat-up sugar bowl, instead of just buying a new one and reclaiming the relationship, then evil has won, and we are truly defeated." If that is true, then the terrorists have triumphed and all is lost. We know this is not so. Evil has not triumphed. Our wounds do not define us. We are formed and reformed by both the triumphs and tragedies of our lives. We need not be defined by them. God has the power to transform the pain, the sorrow, even the brokenness into something astounding. We watch it happen every day. The invitation today is to be a partner in that new creation. Jesus invites us to participate in our healing by offering forgiveness as freely as we have received it. In this way we can become true instruments of healing and peace. It is possible. On this day especially, may it be so!
Amen

² Susan Pendleton Jones, "Forgiven and Forgiving," *Christian Century*, August 25 – September 1, 1999.