

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
September 17, 2023 – The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 18:21-35
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's Gospel reading from Matthew is a continuation of the passage we heard and considered last week and three weeks before that. In that reading Jesus talked to his followers about what to do when members of the church offend one another, when problems arise between people. The important point to emphasize is that all the actions Jesus recommends are taken to carefully pursue true peace among members of the church community. And for true peace to be attained there must be good faith among all parties. Good faith – a matter of the heart, a heart willing to forgive.

We know from this morning's reading that Peter was paying attention to Jesus and thinking through the implications of his instructions. He says to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Maybe Peter had someone in mind, another disciple who regularly offended him, someone he did not really want to forgive. Peter loved Jesus and took his teaching to heart. He was working at how Jesus' teaching might impact his life and his relationships with others. But as we know from many accounts in the Gospel, Peter missed the point of Jesus' teaching.

Have you ever had the privilege of studying with a teacher who truly loved the subject she taught, someone who poured her heart into her lectures and lessons, someone who guided her students to the heights, who inspired people to see the subject with her eyes and love it, too? Imagine being in class with a teacher who has spent the past hour lifting you up to a new vision when a classmate raises her hand and asks, "How many questions do we have to get right on the final to get a passing grade?"

That's something like Peter's question at the end of Jesus' lesson about forgiveness. I think Jesus' response to Peter is full of annoyance, perhaps anger. "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times." Jesus has been teaching the "big picture" of reconciliation and a forgiving heart, and Peter wants to know if forgiving seven times is enough to pass "the test."

Jesus goes on to put the entire matter into a fuller context, a divine/human context, with the Parable of The Unforgiving Servant. Jesus is speaking about the kingdom of heaven, where God is king. The king decides to settle accounts, and a man was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. A talent was equal to six thousand denarii. One denarius was a day-laborer's wage. That comes to sixty million days' wages, 164,383 years. Obviously, a person could never pay such a debt. Jesus says, "out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt."

But that man, who had been forgiven so much, went out and saw another man who owed him a hundred denarii, three months' wages – a reasonable sum to repay. When the man demanded that the debt be paid, the debtor begged for time. "But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt." The one who had been forgiven so much had a heart that was hard against his neighbor.

Report of the incident was brought to the king, who was clearly very angry. He said to the man whose debt he had forgiven, “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?”

This is a very important point. The form of the Lord’s Prayer that we use in worship comes from Matthew’s Gospel. The word translated “trespasses” is the word for “debt,” the same word that is used in this parable. In the Lord’s Prayer, the phrase “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” has led people to assume that we ourselves cannot be forgiven by God until we have forgiven those in our lives who have hurt us. But the parable turns this around: the lord’s forgiveness of the huge debt that the servant owes precedes the forgiveness which the servant ought to offer his fellow slave but does not. In the same way, God’s forgiveness of us precedes any forgiveness that we might need to offer others. God does not forgive us only after we forgive someone in our lives; it is God’s forgiveness of us that should enable us to enter into the process of forgiving others.

All of us stand in need of God’s mercy for we all fall short of living by the Great Commandments to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. Our “debt” to God is enormous if we measure it by the number of times we fall short of living in love. Jesus teaches that no matter how great our debt, God will forgive us. God will have mercy on us. And because God is merciful, we should also be merciful. Because God’s heart is a heart of mercy, our hearts should be merciful toward our brothers and sisters. We mustn’t lose sight of this central teaching when we are repulsed by the threat of punishment at the end of the parable. Again, I hear Jesus’ exasperation in this threat. Something like our inspiring teacher telling the student who wants to know how many questions she must answer correctly to pass the final, “There are 100 questions and if you don’t get them all right, you will fail this course and I’ll make sure you are expelled from this school!”

The Gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry teach us that Jesus was fully human. He experienced and expressed a full range of emotions. We know that he was angry many times, with religious leaders who “got it wrong” about God and with his own closest followers when they “got it wrong” about God. Behind this anger was Jesus’ passionate love of God. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus wanted to lead his disciples to a deep understanding of God’s love and mercy, an understanding that would change everything for them – and for us – an understanding of the heart. Jesus never stopped teaching his disciples about God’s love. He was sometimes exasperated with their slow learning. But I think he must have been patient most of the time, as day after day he showed them what God’s love looks like in human life, even to death on the cross.

God is interested in our hearts – the center of ourselves and our feelings, our intellect, our free will. Jesus is reported to have known what was in people’s hearts, and he taught that our behavior – for good or for ill – comes from our hearts. What might be the questions that God is asking us today, though our Gospel lesson? Perhaps something like these: Will you be merciful as I am merciful? Will you have a heart of flesh and not of stone? Will you love me as I love you? Will you follow Jesus? May all of us answer from our hearts, in the words of our Baptismal Covenant, “I will, with God’s help.” In Jesus’ name. Amen.