

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
September 13, 2026 – The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35
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Before we consider this morning's Gospel reading, a word about the lesson from Genesis. This is the end of the long story of the sons of Jacob – Joseph and his brothers – in Genesis chapters 37 through 50. It's a good story – well worth reading. Joseph's brothers treated him very badly. Out of envy they sold him into slavery, and even now they are lying to him for their own self-preservation – their father Jacob had not given the instruction that Joseph should forgive his brothers. They need the food that Joseph can supply. "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"

In the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (19:18) we find this instruction from God: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." Joseph's mercy to his brothers comes from his obedience to this command from God. And, as I have pointed out many times, Jesus' teaching is directly connected to the teaching of his sacred scripture, the Hebrew Bible. Joseph also points to the redemptive work of God: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (15:20).

Now to our reading from Matthew's Gospel, a continuation of the passage we heard and considered last week. 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. He is not speaking about being polite or "nice" or avoiding conflict (though there may be good reasons to avoid conflict in the church community). Jesus is speaking about peace and reconciliation, if possible. For true peace to be attained there must be good faith among all parties. Good faith – a matter of the heart. Both a heart willing to admit fault and change and a heart willing to forgive.

We know that Peter had paid attention to Jesus. He was 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, 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 had missed the point.

Have you ever had the privilege of studying with a teacher who truly loved the subject she taught, someone who poured herself into her lessons, who guided her students to the heights, inspiring others to love the subject she loved? 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 forgiveness and reconciliation within the community, and Peter wants to know if forgiving seven times is enough to pass "the test."

In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant Jesus puts the matter of forgiveness into a divine/human context. He is speaking about the kingdom of heaven. God is the king who decides to settle accounts. A man was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents, the equivalent of over 164,000 years of wages. 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 went out and saw another man who owed him the equivalent of 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 no mercy for 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 cannot be forgiven by God until we have forgiven those who have hurt us. But the parable turns this around: the king'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 we might need to offer others. When God forgives us, God offers us a re-established relationship with God – a relationship that has been disrupted by our faults. With our relationship with God re-established, we are in the position to mend our relationships with others. Being aware of God's forgiveness of us, we may then be willing to offer forgiveness to others. The Gospel accounts of Jesus healing people and forgiving their sins at the same time suggest how important being forgiven by God is in the process of being made whole and well.

We may be 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 and mercy. He was sometimes exasperated by 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 "heart questions" might God be asking us today? "Will you love me as I love you?" "Will you be merciful as I am merciful?" "Will you follow Jesus and love your neighbor?" "Will you refuse to hold a grudge or take revenge?" 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.