

15 Pentecost A

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In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus insists to Peter, that if he refuses to forgive his sisters and brothers, Peter himself will not be forgiven. He drops the microphone, as he has done so many times in Matthew's Gospel. This parable is puzzling. If the god of Jesus is so generous, why do we find a one-to-one connection here between God's behavior and our own? The answer is found in the Christian vision of the Kingdom of God.

### **I. God has planted the seed of peace in the world through the cross of Jesus, the Christ.**

You see, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. In the person of Jesus, the eternal God became vulnerable to the darkest human motivations, and the demonic machinery of empire. The Father sent the Son, empowered by the Spirit, so that the Triune God could bear in God's own self the wound of sin, and overcome it by love. God has passed judgment upon the entire human race, and borne that judgement in the person of Jesus, the divine man. The King has ended the rebellion in a most shocking way, and has invited all the rebels to come home again. That means that all of us sinners, both small and great, get a fresh start. We have a new life together on the other side of the baptismal font. We who were divided are now one people — one new race — who live as friends of God and of one another. We are no longer enemies, but daughters and sons of God, following in the ways of our elder brother, Jesus.

### **II. Our new life together is challenging.**

Christianity is not for the faint of heart! We come from the baptismal waters, forgiven, loved, and free, but we still must grow up in our faith. We learn to eschew vice, and to practice habits of virtue. We turn away from idolatry, selfishness, anger, lust, envy and pride, and we learn to live courageously as lovers of justice. We practice Christian disciplines as we ask the Spirit to make us people known for love, joy, peace, and gentleness. This sounds good, yes? Of course, we spend our whole lives in this journey - this work of becoming saints. We put one foot in front of the other by practicing repentance. We learn to say, "I'm sorry" when we hurt one another. We learn how to speak kindly and to show generosity when we ourselves have been hurt. When we're accused, we're tempted to respond defensively. When we're wronged, we're tempted to respond angrily. We're tempted to go back to the old way of living, to go back to the rebellion. But now we live under God's reign. Judgment has been completed in the cross of Christ. We don't need to fear it, if only we're willing to turn around and to tell the truth. Because divine judgment has been completed in the cross of Christ, we are not in the business of revenge. We are not in the business of making people pay to the uttermost.

Jesus insists upon this point. We are beneficiaries of Christ's cross, so we stand as ambassadors of that mercy to others. The judge of all the earth has already exercised the divine prerogative to make sure that we get what's coming to us, and has refused it. To this choice we say "Amen, Thanks be to God." We are a people who insist that the cross of Christ is good enough. That's why the Church is concerned for restorative justice, and does not seek revenge. We care about restitution, reconciliation, and transformation. That's why we're a people who don't just believe in second chances, but in the third chance, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh, and then we realize it's silly to keep counting. Instead of counting wrongs, we pass on to one another the same forgiveness that God in Christ has given us. In the Kingdom of God, forgiveness is free. Healing is our goal, we don't have to be afraid to admit when we're wrong. Fear is cast out by love, and we can say things like, "I was wrong." "I'm sorry." "I forgive you." This is the vocabulary of mercy. We practice it every time we pray the general confession, and hear the promise of God's absolution from the priest. But when we refuse to forgive, we take upon ourselves that divine prerogative to condemn. When we refuse to forgive, we give the other sinners good reasons to go back to hiding and even lying about their sins. That's a bad thing.

### **III. This is a bit crazy, though.**

Don't we need some people to stop doing awful things? How can we stymie injustice if we're so quick to forgive everything? Shouldn't we try to stop wicked behavior? [pause] Forgiveness is poorly understood because it's usually badly defined. Often, we think we've forgiven someone when we've merely excused them. Often, we think we've not forgiven when we really have, because we've wisely chosen not to return to the status quo.

To forgive a fault is not the same as excusing it. We can excuse someone's fault when a slight means very little to us. Perhaps it was unintentional, or an understandable shortcoming. If I have dinner plans with a friend, and he neither shows nor calls to cancel, I'll feel a bit hurt. The next day, he calls me to say, oh, my son started running a fever, and I was so involved in that, I forgot anything else I was meant to do, and didn't notice that my phone was dead. When I hear this, I'm not offended any longer. If he apologizes, I brush it aside. I want to know about the fever! "How's your kid?" There's nothing to forgive here. It's just something to excuse. "Of course, you did what you did." Case dismissed! Does this mean that I'm a forgiving person? No! It just means that I'm something more than completely selfish!

However, forgiveness costs us something. Here we move beyond an unreturned phone call, or an insult at a dinner party. When a family member embezzles grandmother's savings, or the police shoot your nephew, or a church member gossips about you, or the nanny allows your daughter to drown in the bath, or your romantic partner hits you, forgiveness is costly,

and we need God's help. When we forgive, we imitate God. We separate the offender from the offense. That's an act of love offered to someone who likely doesn't deserve it. We condemn the offense itself, but release our right to punish the person who harmed us. *We condemn the offense itself, but release our right to punish the person who harmed us.* We refuse gossip, and we refuse to return evil for evil. That's why you'll hear wise Christians speak of forgiveness as a process rather than a one-off decision. Every day that we live with the consequences of someone else's wicked actions, we are faced all over again with the choice of seeking revenge, or walking forward.

#### **IV. Where do we take our pain?**

This requires a deepening piety, centered around the crucified Christ. We learn to offer up this pain to God through prayer, and in conversation with our pastors, spiritual directors, and trusted friends. We look for restitution from the offender, and we hope for reconciliation. We tell the offender the truth about the way in which they hurt us. We invite them to join us in condemning those actions. We do not pretend that the offense did not occur. We do not minimize its effect. This would only build resentment, and hinder the cause of justice and reconciliation. If we find that the murderer, or the brute, or the gossip, or the thief will not turn from their wickedness, to become again a true sister or brother in the Lord, we do not continue in relationship with them. It's not loving to present ourselves repeatedly to be harmed in the same ways. Under God's rule, forgiveness between us is unconditional, but reconciliation is conditional. That's why Matthew's community envisions the church itself getting involved as a mediator.

If all of this sounds messy and difficult, that's because it's a messy and difficult business. We need one another's wisdom, gifts, and graces to sustain this kind of life — that's the point of nearly a third of Matthew's Gospel! But it's only Jesus' open-ended commitment to forgiveness, reconciliation, and love that makes the Christian community a real alternative to the world's politics of violence. It's this rejection of revenge *and* our commitment to truth-telling that makes us a community of where the Holy Spirit will heal broken lives. We don't pretend that forgiveness is easy. We know it's hard. But we also know that it's urgent. It's how our neighbors can see us as a community of second chances, of third chances, of fourth chances, and well, ultimately a community that can't be bothered to count.

Amen.

#### **Further Reading**

Hauerwas, Stanley. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2015.

Smedes, Lewis B. *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. New York: HarperOne, 2007.

Volf, Miroslav. *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.