

Genesis 50:15-21

Matthew 18:21-35

Romans 14:1-12

“The Lord is merciful, gracious, slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love.” AMEN!

(Sing!)

“I’ve been trying to get down

To the Heart of the Matter

But my will gets weak

And my thoughts seem to scatter
but I think it’s about forgiveness

Forgiveness

Even if, even if you don’t love me.”

That song, *The Heart of the Matter*, was performed
by Don Henley on his album
The End of the Innocence.

It’s one of my all time favorite songs.

It speaks of mistakes, heartbreak, and maturity.

Along with the truth, that in the midst of hurting,
it’s nearly impossible to find perspective,
but forgiveness is sacred and possible

without placing it on a timeline.

And (most important) forgiveness, will first benefit
the one who does
the forgiving.

This understanding of forgiveness is
what we are onto this morning, as we connect last
week's message to today's readings.

Recall the way we walked through chapter 18
last week in Matthew's gospel.

Jesus taught the way true greatness.

He taught that the kingdom of heaven,
is like becoming the child Jesus
placed on his knee.

Then he taught that the disciples must
never put stumbling blocks, or impediments
that block the way of those little ones
coming to Jesus.

The parable of the lost sheep was told next,
and Jesus drove home the point that God
seeks out the one that has wandered away
or fallen through the cracks and
finds them.

The parable confirms that the will of God is
to not have anyone be lost, especially
at the hands of those who follow Jesus.

Next, Jesus taught about what to do
when someone sins against you.

That was last week's gospel, remember?

If someone in the assembly sins against you,
you are to go to that person, Jesus said,
privately and point out the wrong.

If it's corrected you've regained them,
if not then grab another person (or two)
to be witnesses and affirm that the
sin is clearly communicated.

If that still doesn't work then call
the whole church together.

The hope is that this third step will be enough
for the person who sinned to stop and
begin behaving in more healthy and
life-giving ways.

If not then they are to be cast out and
treated like tax collectors and gentiles.

The groups that Jesus has come to save,
so in essence those who are sent out are
to be actively pursued and welcomed back.

The promise is said next that when two or three
gather to resolve conflict
then Jesus is there among them. (Pause)

Now, today we have Peter's great question!

And if we are honest, we are wondering
the same thing.

How many times must we forgive, Jesus?

What's the requirement?

The limit?

How many times must I be gracious to
the one who doesn't get it?

The one who's not being healthy, or safe,
or careful with their words or actions.
Like Peter, I want to know when enough is enough!

Then Jesus gave the "microphone dropping" reply.

“Seventy seven times or seven times seventy times.”

In other words, Jesus wants us
to never stop forgiving.

That’s absurd!

Why?

I’ll share three reasons. (Pause)

The first one is because the church
should be known for its forgiveness.

And the only way to be a forgiving church
is to forgive those who’ve wronged it.

That’s hard to do because we love the church,
hold it to be sacred, and it feels like we are
being weak when we don’t fight back,

but Jesus taught that when a community
practices ongoing forgiveness,
the church community,
the Body of Christ, stays together. (Pause)

The second reason to forgive is because
it removes the mindset that the one wronged
must deliver vengeance upon the wrongdoer.

For this is what the world teaches.

Even the Bible says, “take an eye for an eye.”

But, Jesus unplugs, or re-interprets,
this rule in today’s gospel. (Pause)

There’s a Buddhist story about a monk
who preferred to meditate
at the edge of the lake.

The calmness of the water and the
gentle breeze made it perfect.

It was his favorite place, and he returned
day after day to the soft sand and water’s edge.

One morning, while achieving deep meditation
something strange happened.

He felt something hit him.

He opened his eyes and saw that
a small wooden rowboat bumped into him.

He was disturbed and anger rushed into him.

Who would do this?

“Who would be so rude and
disturb my quiet meditation?”

He stood up ready to shout at the unobservant person,
but when he looked in the boat,
no one was there.

The boat was empty.

It had just floated across the lake with the breeze.

In that moment something changed in him.

It was not the boat that made him angry,
it was the thought that someone in it
had been careless.

There was no one to blame,
the boat was empty!

It was then that he saw that the anger he felt
came from within him,
and not from someone else.

So from that day on, when he sensed
something/someone upsetting him,
he would remind himself that
the boat is empty.

This taught him that peace does not
come from controlling others or the world,
but from calming our own heart.

So now, when our anger sparks from
an unkind word or perceived behavior and
we want to respond with vengeance,
try to remember this story.

Take a deep breathe and say to yourself,
“the boat is empty.”

You have the power to reject the desire for vengeance.
(Pause)

The third reason why unceasing forgiveness
is a good practice for us to continue cultivating
comes from the parable lesson that
follows Peter’s question of how many times.

And to be succinct, this story is about a man
who received forgiveness for huge debt
that he owed the king.

Then, later, the same man rejects
forgiving a peer of a much smaller debt.

There's something flawed in us when
the truth is revealed that we ask for, and receive,
forgiveness from God, but then neglect to
extend it to others.

The third reason why Jesus taught that
forgiveness without ceasing was for this point.

God forgives you, you ought to forgive others. (Pause)

I want to be careful here, though.

Forgiveness without ceasing doesn't mean
we become someone's doormat,
punching bag (literal or metaphorical),
nor does the practice of
ceaseless forgiving make us
powerless in any way.

It's the opposite, really.

One can forgive the other and
still keep them at arms length,
or further, if necessary.

The "heart of the matter" of forgiveness is
to not despise the wrongdoer, nor seek
vengeance upon them...

The boat is empty and the
 forgiving church is held together,
 helping to ensure no one is lost forever.

AMEN!