

The Craft of Forgiveness

Matthew 18: 21-35

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 13) 2020

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If, as Augustine and Aquinas rightly insist, [we] become habituated to wickedness so that it is both no longer a struggle that we worry about and also something in which we actually, perversely, learn to ‘delight’ in doing, then forgiveness needs to become a habit that transforms – by God’s gracious love – our sin and evil into signs of communion with God, with one another, and with the whole Creation.

- L. Gregory Jones

One of my favorite and most important books is Matthew Crawford’s *Shopclass as Soulcraft*, in which Crawford tells about getting his Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Virginia and then teaching for some time at the University of Chicago. Eventually, burned-out by the stresses of teaching in higher education, he returned to his first love back in small town Virginia, the repairing of old motorcycles. He works with his hands; he practices a craft. And eventually he learns that working in a craft transforms the way he thinks.

Crawford quotes Michael Polanyi, who was a scientist but who read and thought about everything. Polanyi called learning through a craft, “tacit knowledge.” Polanyi said that some knowledge cannot be learned from a book or manual, but “can be passed on only by example from master to apprentice” (quoted in Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*, p. 134). Tacit knowledge is personal and participatory. We do not read about it ahead of time and then do it. Instead, we do it and as we do it, we learn it. We do it, and over time, it makes sense to us. The master shows us how to do it and we practice it like the master,

until the knowledge becomes our own.

Therefore, Crawford points out, that a craft is something that is done in community, in relationship (master and apprentice), and it is an ongoing conversation with the tradition of that community in which there is a dialogue depending on the situation. You're always talking back and forth about the craft, as you practice it and learn it.

So, here is what I want you to do. I want you to learn to think about the Christian life as a craft. It is less about what you know or believe and more about what you do. I'm not suggesting that beliefs and teachings are not important (I am after all, teaching in this sermon), but I am saying that our beliefs won't make much sense apart from participating in it and participating in community. I remember St. Francis said, "You know only as much as you do." Which he meant, if you don't do it, then you won't know it.

In the early church, it was common for baptismal candidates to have to change their habits before they were ever allowed to read the Bible or listen to teaching on beliefs from their mentors. They had to change what they did – demonstrate how they treated people who were poor, show that they no longer practiced violence, demonstrated patience, and mercy, and love, learn the proper humble posture during prayer. Only after they showed changed behavior which were habituated, became new habits, were they allowed to start reading Jesus' Sermon on the Mount because their mentors believed that they could not understand what Jesus was talking about if they had not changed how they did things. Tacit knowledge. A craft.

This morning Jesus – the master – is training his apprentices – the disciples and us, in the craft of forgiveness. This is hard work; hard news. It is good news but it is hard, too.

In our lesson for the day, Peter steps forward to offer his comment on how many times we should forgive those who have offended us. Beyond the standard couple of times, and even beyond the three times prescribed by Judaism, Peter goes the second and third mile and says that we should forgive *seven* times.

Jesus responds with, “Not seven times, but *seven times seventy!*” He then tells this parable about those who are willing to receive God’s forgiveness but are unwilling to offer it to others. A king decides it is time to settle accounts. He calls in a servant who owes him a large amount of money and is prepared to punish him. The servant falls down pleading for the king to be patient, and in time he will repay the debt. The king responds by forgiving the debt owed.

Forgiven and relieved the servant leaves and is going down the street and sees someone who owes him a few dollars. He goes over, throws the fellow up against the wall, grabs him by the throat, and says, “Pay up!” The fellow falls down pleading for the servant to have patience with him until he can pay off the debt. The servant has no patience and has the debtor thrown into jail. Of course, word gets around and eventually the king hears what happened. He is furious at the news and calls the servant back into his presence. “You sorry servant! I forgave you the great debt you owed to me because you asked for mercy and you turned around and refused mercy to the one who asked you for mercy!” Then he had the

servant seized and thrown into jail and tortured until he repaid the debt.

Jesus concludes with these hard words, “So my heavenly father will do to every one of you who do not forgive your brother or sister.”

Wow. Tough parable. What do we do about this?

I encourage you to go back and read the entire chapter 18 of Matthew. In verse 20, Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Jesus is talking to the church. Indeed, this whole extended passage is Jesus addressing those of us who are followers of him. He has been talking about the responsibility we have for one another so that when we have disagreements, or we have offended one another, that we go to one another and work it out. The body of Christ is the essence of who we are that when there is brokenness and dismemberment, we go to one another and ask for forgiveness and are reconciled.

This is why Peter asks his question, “So Lord, how many times are we to forgive one another?” “How many times am I going to have to do this?” “If this person won’t change, how long am I going to have to forgive him or her?”

Of course, part of our problem is that we are thinking like Peter in terms of numbers. How many times? How long? Quantitatively. And we think like that because we don’t know any alternative.

Jesus says that even how we ask the questions is a problem. Forgiveness is not an isolated action or a specific word and certainly not a feeling. Forgiveness is

a way of life. It is a craft, a skill, a habit that we practice every day until it becomes second nature to us. When forgiveness and reconciliation become second nature to us then our questions are going to be very different than from when we thought of forgiveness as an isolated event.

The church is the body of Jesus Christ, where in baptism we are made members of one another. Forgiveness means that one part of our body is broken and hurting, and we need to help mend the body. If our arm is broken, then we do not ignore it, we seek to have it repaired and mended. We are to make the fragmented, dismembered body one, whole body again. That is why it is called atonement, at-one-ment.

Last week, we talked about this as an “ongoing conversation” in which we learn how to listen with humility and patience, and we learn how to respond with humility and patience. In this context we learn to tell one another when there is an offense between us. We learn to listen to one another, not with the purpose of telling one another off, but with the purpose of genuine reconciliation in Jesus Christ. So, we might be the body of Christ.

Forgiveness does not mean that we forget. It means that we remember differently because of Jesus. We learn to remember well; to remember rightly. Remembering rightly the offense against us, or our offense against others, does not mean “let’s not talk about it” or “that happened a long time ago and I’m not responsible,” or even “I only want to forget.” Instead, forgiveness begins in listening and speaking, facing and recognizing the truth.

For example, racism is real. It was real in our past and it is real now. It is something we are “in” not simply we do. It is systemic. We White people, and especially the White church, must face the truth of our sin.

Part of our ongoing conversation with our sisters and brothers of color, is this acknowledgement of our sin. And for those of us in Christ, we learn that the conversation continues. We’re just getting started.

I think part of Peter’s assertion that we are to forgive seven times and Jesus’ response that we forgive seven times seventy, is this reality that true forgiveness is something that often takes a while. Many times, it is not a one-time event. The truth of our sin keeps coming up and we have to keep facing it. The pain of being hurt sometimes is recurring. Sometimes it takes 7 times 70 times.

One of my most beloved professors at Baylor was Dr. Jack Flanders, who taught New Testament. I remember Dr. Flanders telling us in class of his struggle to forgive someone. It took years of daily prayer. At first, he couldn’t even mention the person in his prayers, at all. Then he prayed, “O God, I hate that person. I know I shouldn’t, but I do. Please have mercy on me.” Over time, he got to where he could pray, “God, I know I need to forgive that person, but I can’t. Help me.” Eventually, after years, he was able to pray, “Lord, I forgive him and forgive me of my hatred.” Finally, he wrote a long letter to the person.

It takes time. But the grace of God is that God gives us the time.

The grace of God also is we do not have to face the truth or face the pain

again and again, by ourselves. We are part of the body of Christ where we deal with both the sin and the pain resulting from sin together. God is with us. And we learn to be with each other.

Now, I'll be the first to say that this sounds pretty overwhelming. It is not much different from one of us whose only experience with baseball is watching it on TV. Then someone hands us a bat and tells us to go out there and hit against a good high school pitcher who's throwing 70 mph fastballs. We don't know how because we haven't practiced; we haven't trained. Then when something really big comes along and throws 100 mph fastballs at us, and we really don't know what to do. We haven't been faithful in little things, so it is not that we are not faithful in big things; it is that we don't even know what faithfulness in big things looks like. We have never practiced. No one showed us or taught us.

I used the analogy of the craft of hitting a baseball but I could also speak of the craft of playing the piano, or quilting, or mechanics, or carpentry, or ... learning to pray, learning to love others who are perceived to be different, learning to be non-violent and loving, or simply learning to worship and follow the Risen Christ. Or learning to forgive. It is a craft that we learn by practicing in community.

Jesus Christ calls us to be a people, a specific, concrete, in-the-flesh people who live his Way of forgiveness and reconciliation. You see, the call of Christ is not simply about you and me as individuals; it is about creating a community, a people who live this genuine alternative Way of reconciliation in this old world. We are to be a witness of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation in a world that

knows only violence, vengeance, and brokenness.

We live in a time and a country where revenge, disdain, bullying, and ruthlessness are trumpeted from the highest centers of power. It will take courage and grace to respond to such depravity as followers of Jesus. Only rooted deeply in the Living God, immersed in prayer and scripture, profoundly connected in the body of Christ, with deep habits of love and forgiveness can we be a people who live and show an alternative to evil – and not be overwhelmed by evil. There is another way. That is good news.

Theologian Miroslav Volf writes of when he was a young man in what was then Communist Yugoslavia. In 1983 he was summoned to compulsory military service, but since his wife was a U.S. citizen, and he was the son of a pastor who was deeply suspected by those in power of being seditious, and since Volf carried with him and read a Greek New Testament, he was brought in for interrogation over the next several months. He was not physically tortured but apparently, everything short of it including intense psychological torture. A particular interrogator, only identified as “Captain G.” relentlessly interrogated Volf for months, seeming to enjoy every minute of it. Over twenty years later Volf wrote, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. In it he says, “To triumph fully, evil needs two victories, not one. The first victory happens when an evil deed is perpetrated; the second victory, when evil is returned. After the first victory, evil would die if the second victory did not infuse it with new life.” He goes on, “In my own situation, I could do nothing about the first victory, but I could prevent the second, Captain G. would not mold me into his image. Instead of returning evil for evil, I would heed the Apostle Paul and try to overcome evil with

good (Romans 12:21). After all, I myself had been redeemed by the God who in Christ died for the redemption of the ungodly. And so once again, now in relation to Captain G., I started walking – and stumbling – in the footsteps of the enemy-loving God” (*The End of Memory*, p. 9).

The Way of Jesus Christ is hard news. It is good news, but it is hard news, too.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.