**September 14, 2014 – 14th Sunday after Pentecost**

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Today’s Gospel looks at one of the hardest things for Christians to talk about, even behind closed doors. No, I don’t mean stewardship. That’s coming up. Today’s Gospel talks about Forgiveness.

Like it or not, forgiveness is part of the backbone of our faith:

*“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”*

*“We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”*

*“Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.”*

Right after Jesus has talks about how to deal with conflict among members of the Church, Peter asks the next logical question. “So, Jesus. Say someone does me wrong more than once. How often do I need to forgive him?” Then he picks what he thinks is a really large number out of a hat. “As many as SEVEN times? Ha ha ha!

And Jesus says, “Ha ha. But seriously, Pete, try SEVENTY seven times!” Probably not the answer Peter was hoping to hear!

I have to tell you about a rabbit hole I jumped down regarding that number seventy-seven. Most of the older translations say “seventy TIMES seven,” which is how it’s literally translated. However, there’s no clear indication in the Greek text that the word times means multiplication in the way we think of it, so it’s hard to know what is correct. Needless to say, the scholars are still arguing over this one!

It actually doesn’t matter, in the long run, which translation we use. In the Jewish culture the number seven is very special. It is the number associated with God and the divine, and it means perfection or totality. So whether Jesus told Peter to forgive seventy-seven or four hundred and ninety times, what he was really talking about was forgiving a person EVERY time someone sinned against him. Every single time.

All of a sudden, this gets a lot harder.

Without giving Peter a chance to reply, Jesus launches into another parable. It starts out with a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. The first (and only) one we hear about is a poor guy who owed 10,000 talents to the king. Jesus doesn’t say if these are gold or silver talents, but no matter what, this was a BOATLOAD of money.

To put this in perspective, a talent was an ancient unit of weight, rather than a coin denomination. It was the equivalent of the weight of enough water to fill an amphora, or large jar, and, depending on where you look for the information, this was anywhere between 65 and 75 pounds. So a talent was 65 to 75 pounds of either silver or gold, worth between $6,500 and $660,000 in today’s money. 10,000 of those bad boys would be worth between 65 million and 6.6 billion dollars!

Another way of looking at it is that a talent of silver was worth 6,000 denarii. A denarius is what a typical laborer could expect to earn in a day. In other words, it would take someone about sixteen years to earn one talent. In the case of this poor servant, it would take him 160,000 years to pay off his debt, assuming he didn’t spend any of his earnings on frivolous things like food. That’s worse than even student loans!

So was Jesus just exaggerating to make his point? Well, the number ten is also very important in Jewish thought. It symbolizes absolute completeness, similar to the number seven. So one way to looking at owing 10,000 talents is to basically owe all the money in the world. It’s impossible to repay. Hold on to that thought.

The king tells the servant to fork over what he owes or face being sold along with his wife and family to pay the debt. The servant, knowing that he owes far more than he could ever repay, falls down on his knees and begs the king for mercy. The king, being a good sort, not only lets him go, but forgives the entire debt. Just writes it off. Unheard of today, for sure!

So what does the servant do? As he was heading out the door, debt-free, he sees one of his fellow slaves, who happened to owe HIM money. A hundred denarii – a teeny tiny fraction of what he, himself, had owed to the king. The second slave begs the first one to be patient and promises to pay, just like the first one had begged the king, but the first slave, in spite of the wonderful treatment he had just received at the hands of the king, throws the book at the second slave and has him thrown in jail.

Well, apparently this cheesed off the other servants, because this behavior got back to the king in pretty short order. And apparently, kings don’t have much of a sense of humor, because the king lowered the boom on the first slave. “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” he demanded, before having him hauled off to a nasty end.

Jesus is making a not-too-subtle point here about forgiveness. We owe God absolutely everything we have and everything we are, and can never repay it. In spite of this, God, through his mercy, forgives whatever sins and transgressions we may have committed, freely and without asking anything in return except that we treat our fellow human beings with compassion and mercy. *“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”*

But as the first slave demonstrates, we don’t always do that. In fact, we rarely do it. The reason is not because we’re all bad people, or because of original sin, or whatever, but because it’s hard to do. Forgiveness is hard work, plain and simple.

Forgiveness isn’t a feeling. It isn’t an emotion. Forgiveness is an act of will, sometimes even against our better judgment. And here Jesus is telling Peter that he must take this action, must make this difficult choice, every single time someone sins against him. Every time, without exception. It’s a conscious choice to set aside pride, hurt, anger, and resentment in favor of mercy.

Forgiveness is a forward looking action, not backward looking. As soon as forgiveness is given, the act that is being forgiven is over. It’s in the past. But in some ways, this is the hardest part of forgiveness. The comedian, Lily Tomlin, of all people, once said, “Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past.”

Because merely saying that an injury is over doesn’t make it easy to forget. Our memories store hurt and injury for a long, long time. Just like our bodies store memories of physical injuries. And sometimes we don’t WANT to let it go, as if letting go of our hurt or anger will somehow excuse whatever was done to us. But, as C.S. Lewis said, “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”

And forgiveness isn’t the same as justice, but ultimately, there can be no true justice without forgiveness. Justice without forgiveness or mercy quickly turns into revenge and retribution. Nor is forgiveness reconciliation. Reconciliation requires repentance on behalf of the offender. Forgiveness doesn’t. It’s the action taken by the person offended against, regardless of what the offender does.

This is what makes it so hard.

One interesting thing about this Gospel passage, like the one last week, is that Peter is asking on behalf of the Church. Actually, that isn’t quite an accurate translation on the part of the NRSV – Peter actually says, “Lord, how often shall I forgive a brother who sins against me?” But the implication, as most translators have agreed, is that brother here means brothers and sisters in Christ, not his biological siblings. In other words, the Church.

Once again, Matthew is making the point that these actions have to start within the body of Christ’s followers. We need to start treating each other with mercy and forgiveness. How many times have you heard something like, “Boy, if they treat each other this badly, imagine how they treat outsiders? Or, “Why should I join a group who are fighting each other all the time?” Or, “Wow, they sure don’t act very Christian, do they?”

Our actions are not very reflective of Christ’s own actions, far too much of the time. And we need to start fixing this at home first. So where do we start?

Well, I think we can start right here. Grace is an old church, in the sense that we’ve been here a long, long time. And our institutional memory goes back nearly as far, and has been carried forward to this day. We need to let go of hurts that were inflicted before most of us were born, if such exist. We need to let go of wrongs that were done to some of us in our lifetime, but perhaps a long time ago. And we need to let go of injuries that happened yesterday (or at least more recently). We need to forgive. We need to let the past remain in the past, not carry it around with us. And this needs to be done by each of us, individually, before we can forgive as a community.

Some of our resentment is habit. Some is institutional. Some is even buried so far in our subconscious that we don’t even realize it’s there, and it’s hard to forgive something we can’t even remember clearly. So each of us needs to search our hearts and spend time in prayer, to uncover anything that might be holding us back through our unforgiveness.

Because the consequences of not forgiving and not letting go of the past will frankly be disastrous. A community who lives in the past cannot move into the future. People who harbor resentment in their hearts will not have room in those same hearts for compassion or empathy or ministry. And a community who is ruled by anger cannot be a community who is moved by joy.

Let’s work on this together, consciously and prayerfully, over the upcoming months, so that when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord next Easter, we will also be celebrating our own new birth in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Amen.