

Exodus 14:19-31

Psalm 114

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

Not too long ago, I came across a fascinating story about forgiveness passed on by a distinguished mental health consultant.

In the Babemba tribe of southern Africa in Zambia, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he is placed in the centre of the village, alone and unfettered. All work ceases, and every man, woman, and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual.

Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, each recalling the good things the person in the centre of the circle has done in his lifetime. Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with any detail and accuracy, is recounted. All his positive attributes, good deeds, strengths, and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length. This tribal ceremony often lasts for several days.

At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe.

When I first heard this story, I tried to imagine what it would be like to be a member of the circle volunteering words of praise and admiration to someone that I might actually be upset with. Just trying to imagine such a thing worked a bit of a change in me. It softened me just a bit. It put lots of things in perspective for me. There are good things in everyone ... even the folks I'm not too happy with at the moment.

And then I tried to imagine what it would be like to be standing alone in the middle of that circle. Imagine yourself in the middle of that circle ... surrounded by people you know and probably love ... members of your extended family, lifelong friends, and people you may quarrel with from time to time. These are people that you've known all your life ... and there you are literally in the center of attention ... knowing that you are guilty of some horrible wrong ... feeling very guilty for your misdeed ... and then hearing all those words of affirmation of you ... of love ... of acceptance ... of celebration of you. It's almost too much to bear. Thinking about

myself in the middle of that circle was overwhelming. It brought tears to my eyes. I felt like I would probably want to run away. It's too much. It's a scene of extravagant love ... a scene of amazing grace ... and it's a scene of healing and reconciliation.

And that's exactly what Jesus is talking about in the parable we just heard in the gospel lesson this morning. Jesus uses a parable to answer Peter's question about how many times he should forgive another member of the church who sins against him. It's important that we don't lose sight of the fact that the question is raised and answered in the context of the community of the church. Peter thinks he's being really generous when he offers '7' as the number of times we should forgive someone. In the world in they live in, forgiving someone once or twice is more than enough. Sometimes it's more than enough in our world.

Jesus answers Peter with an even more outrageous number than '7'. Jesus says forgiveness should be offered '77' times. This passage is often translated as '7 times 7' which actually represents infinity. So forgiveness is to be offered without limit and forever.

The unlimited forgiveness that Jesus requires, however, does not mean we must continue to put ourselves in the line of fire of someone whose way of relating to us is abusive. We are to forgive because that releases us from the internal turmoil of anger and hurt, but Jesus is not asking us to continue to put ourselves at risk.

PAUSE

After telling Peter about unlimited forgiveness, Jesus goes on to tell the parable about the forgiving lord. He uses exaggerated information to make his point. Never let it be said that Jesus doesn't have a sense of humor! The scenario he describes at the beginning of the parable is ridiculous. The slave being called to account owes 10,000 talents to his lord. In our own heads, it would be easy to equate this with \$10,000 which would probably be pretty hard for most of us to do, but we could probably manage it one way or another. But a 'talent' isn't a 'dollar.' One talent represents about 15 years of steady work which is a lifetime of work. So imagine if you had to come up with 10,000 times your lifetime average annual income? Can't be done! Impossible!! It's over the top! It's ridiculous! Jesus is making his point. It's too much. It's too big a debt to be forgiven. And don't all of us feel that same way about our own debts or sins from time to time? They seem to us to be too big to be forgiven.

But in this parable, that's exactly what the lord does. He forgives the unforgiveable and impossible debt. Think about that the next time you think that you have sinned in some way that is unforgiveable to God. You might be able to intellectually agree that you believe that God

forgives the unforgiveable, but what about allowing that forgiveness to really transform you? What about forgiving not only others of the unforgiveable sin, but ourselves as well. How many times have you said, "I know God forgives me. I just can't forgive myself. It was too awful." We do that to ourselves, don't we? We actually refuse the gracious and generous and amazing forgiveness that God offers us. God lets us off the hook and we don't get off! We know we don't deserve it, so we leave this gift sitting on the table and we walk away. We refuse the gift. And maybe that's why it was so hard for the forgiven slave to forgive the slave who was indebted to him for so much less. Perhaps this forgiven slave, like us, was happy to be let off the hook, but held tight to the part of him that knew it was undeserved. When we can't take in the forgiveness ... when we can't let ourselves off the hook ... when we can't embrace this wonderful gift from God that sets us free, then we have a really hard time looking at others who are also undeserving. The temptation is to hold them to account ... the way we know that we deserve to be... and should have been ... held to account. And then the glory of God's generosity is lost. Not only do we not benefit from this wonderful gift, but neither do the people around us.

In the parable, the forgiving lord is furious that his generosity has been paid forward and he lashes out at the forgiven slave who won't forgive another. He hands him over to be tortured. And Jesus says that God will do the same with us when we don't forgive a brother or a sister from the heart the way God has forgiven us. But maybe it's not God who is doing it to us. Maybe we are doing it to ourselves ... first by beating up ourselves daily for a sin that has already been forgiven ... and then by sharing our misery with others by refusing to forgive them in the same way we refuse to forgive ourselves. We make our own prison. We provide our own torture. And we share that prison and that torture with those we need to forgive. Holding a grudge ... refusing to forgive ... is a bit like taking poison ... and then expecting the other person to die. The forgiveness we give is for our own benefit as well as for the sinner's benefit!

The power to forgive is that extra gift we get when we embrace the over-the-top extravagant and lavish forgiveness that God gives us. God sets us free. He sets us free from guilt. He sets us free from self-loathing. He sets us free and empowers us to use the gift of forgiveness with others to set them ... and ourselves ... free. Like any other act that is repeated, the more often we do it, the easier it gets to do. And as we are transformed, the world around us, the one in which we live, the circle that we are a part of becomes transformed as well.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.