

Exodus 14:19-31

Psalm 114

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

We live in a world that has limits.

There's a limited amount of sunshine every day. Some days have more than others, but there's always a limit.

Conversely, there's also a limit to the darkness. Eventually the sun does come up and the stars go into hiding.

We have a limited amount of time in this life, although very few of us live as if we know that. Our days are numbered. We just don't know what the number is.

All of us have a finite amount of money. Hopefully, there's enough to go around to get all the necessities covered, but that's not always a guarantee. No matter how much we have...a little or a lot...there is a limit.

There are limits to everything in this life.

But today in the gospel lesson we just heard, Jesus is telling us that he wants us to consider infinity...no limits. It's the bottomless pit. It's the world everlasting. The subject on his mind is one that concerns every single one of us...it is forgiveness. And there is to be no limit to the

amount we give nor apparently to the amount we can receive. That's both good news and bad news.

Let's tackle the bad news first.

We human beings have memories like elephants. We can remember actions and entire conversations...word for word...that happened decades ago, especially if we walked away from those encounters feeling diminished or wounded. We know where we were. We remember what was happening. We have the stinging words and actions etched in our memories. We pull them up every now and then just to review them one more time...and we find that we are wounded and diminished all over again. And we swear that we will *never*, ever forgive the perpetrator. Not ever! And we also realize that now the wound feels fresh...again and again and again...every time we think about it. Our hearts hurt again. There may be a few tears. We may feel frustrated. We may feel angry. But we are all stirred up once more. Now. Stop and think for a moment. What's happened to the one who wounded us so much as a result of our lingering over the offense? Absolutely nothing! Our unwillingness to forgive has affected no one except ourselves. That nasty so-and-so who was so ugly to us is just skating along without a care in the world. All the while, after examining our wounds for the umpteenth time, we carefully

pack them up and put them in our gunny sack of grudges that we sling over our shoulder and carry with us everywhere we go.

Does that sound familiar?

There's a way out, you know. Jesus is offering us the way out. It doesn't sound like it at first when he tells us to forgive 70 times 7. That's the Biblical equivalent of infinity. Forever. We are to forgive forever. A limitless number of times. Over and over and over again. Actually, Jesus is inviting us to empty our gunny sack so we don't have the burden of carrying it around with us all the time. What Jesus tells Peter is that there is no limit to the number of times we should forgive someone. In the same breath, Jesus is not instructing us to remain in the line of fire. He's not telling us that if we are being abused by a parent, or a sibling, or a spouse, or a boss that we should remain in that relationship. He's offering us a way out...out of a troublesome situation and out of the obligation that we put on ourselves to carry our grudges around with us and re-wound ourselves in memory periodically. As if that would somehow punish the transgressor. Jesus is not looking out for the one who hurt us. Jesus is looking out for us...for you and for me! He doesn't

want us to be perpetually wounded by the same person and the same incident over and over again. Forgiveness is the way out for us.

And all of this is happening in the context of the community of believers...the church. Peter wants to know how many times he's supposed to forgive if another member of the church sins against him. Bear in mind that Jesus is talking about 'the church' that he has not yet established. So Matthew is writing to the members of the early church who are experiencing some of the same church politics that you and I are familiar with. We've all been in churches where there are factions. We've all been in churches where we know that this person never speaks to that person. Or where people selectively refuse to pass the peace with another church member. If we pause for a moment, it is easy to see that Jesus, through the gospel writer Matthew, is telling us that we should actually make a point of passing the pass...as genuinely as we can...to the one person that we are the least inclined to want to share the peace with. Jesus is not only talking about our personal well-being in unloading our gunny sack of grudges. Jesus is also talking about the health of the body of Christ that is the church. The ironic thing about all of this is that the offender...the one who has done the 'wounding' to us...may have absolutely no idea that we felt wounded by something they said or did. People are more oblivious than we realize and grudges get in the way.

Grudges not only get in *our* way, they become obvious to other people and then they get in *their* way. Jesus is looking out for our welfare and he's looking out for the community of believers that is his body in the world after his resurrection and ascension. And we shouldn't kid ourselves. We shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that our gunny sack full of grudges is a private affair. It's not. It becomes obvious to others and then like a cancer, it invades the entire church community. We all know that bodies consumed by cancer can't function well. The same can be said of the body of Christ that is the church. The concern Jesus has is with the life of the church and the practices necessary to build up the community of faith. At the heart of those practices is forgiveness, not as an isolated fact, although it may feel that way at the time, but as an ongoing activity among members of the church community. Within this context, there can be no limit on forgiveness, because it is a never-ending practice that is essential to the life of the church. Every church is a laboratory...a training ground...for practicing forgiveness.

In the gospel lesson we heard last week, Jesus outlines a process of how to handle church politics...of how church members should relate to one another. It involves naming the sin which means the one who is offended needs to let the offender know how his or her actions affected the offended one. When possible, the offender then needs to express some

regret for the offense...offer an apology as it were. And where necessary, other members of the church community are to be brought in to help make the repair. The bottom line is that each member of the church community is important. Each member has a part to play in the functioning of the body of Christ. No one is expendable and no one is exempt from being held accountable. Only within this context does Jesus call us to forgive other church members countless times. The forgiveness Jesus calls for is inseparable from truth telling and accountability within the church. Membership in the church is akin to being in a laboratory where we can practice...with support and guidance...all the things that Jesus has taught us to do. And we've probably...none of us... ever been in a church family in which we were not given multiple opportunities to practice forgiveness...whether an apology was offered or not!

As we think about the parable Jesus uses to emphasize this whole matter of forgiveness, we realize that we are being drawn into one of the most ubiquitous credos of the Christian faith...the Lord's Prayer. In the parable we just heard in the gospel this morning, the king (who is God) forgives a monstrous and unpayable debt owed by his slave (that would be us). The slave then turns around and refuses to give a fellow slave forgiveness for a much smaller debt. And all who hear this story wonder...how could the first slave do that? Didn't he learn anything from his own pardon and

from the forgiveness given to him? Good question. Think about what we say when we repeat the words of the Lord's prayer. We say, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It could just as easily say, "Forgive us our trespasses...*in the same way*...that we forgive those who trespass against us." Is that truly what you want God to do? Do you really want God to forgive you in the same way that you forgive others?

Think about the size and the weight of your gunny sack of grudges. Think about the times you've refused to forgive and then think about why you refuse. Jesus is offering to help you unload your gunny sack of grudges. He's offering to relieve you of that burden so you can actually function as the child of God that he knows you are. And Jesus is also looking out for his own body in the world...the church. Neither you nor the church can function well and be healthy without the ongoing practice of forgiveness...ad infinitum...limitless!!

Day before yesterday was September 11. All of us here can remember what happened nineteen years ago on September 11, 2001. The destruction of the World Trade Center, the damage to the Pentagon and the airplane crash in Pennsylvania were unprovoked attacks on our country and on our soil. It was the equivalent of Pearl Harbor for our

generation. All of us can remember where we were and how we learned of the attack and how we felt. Whether or not we ever forgive those who planned and implemented this unprovoked attack is between each of us and our Creator. Sometimes the call to forgive is more than we can muster, but we also need to remember that the call to forgive does not include a call to forget. We will never forget and I doubt that we are being asked to.

We know that we can't tackle forgiveness alone and God knows that we can't do it alone. That's why he sent his Son, Jesus, to be with us, to teach us, to show us, to strengthen us, to support us as we make the attempt to keep ourselves healthy and to keep Christ's body in the world, the Church, healthy.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.