

True Forgiveness Is True Peace A Sermon for The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (A)

Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. . . Matthew 18:22

In other words, an incalculable number of times. In Hebrew every word has a numerical value and can also communicate a deeper truth. Jesus simply is doing the math, physically and spiritually. Seventy times seven is 490 (the last time I checked) a pretty impressive number all by itself. But 490 also happens to be the numerical value of the Hebrew word 'tamim' which means 'complete, perfect, finished.'

Jesus didn't sleep through Sunday school class! What he is telling Peter, and us, is the same thing Solomon commends to Israel in the First Book of Kings: 'Let your heart be perfect,' he says in blessing. So, forgiving helps make us complete; it is key to perfecting our heart. Forgiveness puts us in touch with eternity.

But never one content with generalities, Jesus goes on to tell us a parable. In it a slave is indebted to the king for a substantial sum; pleading for more time in which to repay, he is forgiven the entire amount. The king simply takes pity on him. This same slave, however, then demands of a fellow servant immediate payment of a vastly smaller amount (look up the difference between talents and denarii sometime!) Deaf to all pleading, he has the other slave thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. The other slaves get wind of this and report the action back to the king who dispatches the wicked servant in similar fashion, handing him over to be tortured until he could repay all of what he owed. (Debtors' prison was never a fun place!)

We might, of course, find the unforgiving slave's fate just a tiny bit harsh; yet the moral of the story sounds just as ominous, though not entirely unjust if you think of it. 'So my Heavenly Father will also do to every one of you,' Jesus predicts, 'if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.' Showing mercy, forgiving another is not a small matter in our spiritual lives, not if we hope to see God face to face. And for this to be genuine it must be complete and perfect; it must come from within. It must stem from the heart. The truth is, without it we may find ourselves in a debtors' prison of our own making, already tortured by a pain and hurt even greater than the hurt we've experienced from someone else.

There are so many things we can say about showing forgiveness. Yet in most cases, I think, these concern issues that Jesus doesn't specifically address here. Perhaps he doesn't need to. For instance, should we forgive another even if they do not ask our forgiveness, even if they have done nothing to earn it, even if, getting the chance, they would very likely hurt us in the same way again? As a pastor, I can't tell you how many times I've heard these same tearful questions repeated back to me.

It's true that the goal of forgiveness is peace, and for such peace to be complete and fulfilling, for it to be true peace, it must be reciprocal. It must be given and received equally in the spirit of love. It must be shared. This is the ideal; this is what God desires. This is what Jesus means when he says 'from the heart' mercy that flows from the human core both of forgiver and forgiven.

But what if this true peace, the fruit of forgiveness, is not possible? Each of us has known, I'm sure, occasions in our lives when those who have hurt us, those who would seem to owe us a

debt (in contrition if not in coin) neither acknowledge nor appreciate the wounds they've inflicted. They have not asked our forgiveness; they may still wish us harm. What then?

As I thought of the Gospel this morning, I remembered something Nelson Mandela writes in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*. After spending 27 years as a political prisoner in South Africa time spent in an eight-by-seven-foot concrete cell, days spent breaking large rocks into smaller ones, years that robbed him of his liberty and his youth on the day of his release in 1990, he comes to a soul-shaking conclusion that would inspire the remainder of his life: 'As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom,' he writes, 'I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.'

He would later say that once he forgave his persecutors, not broadly or theoretically, but personally, from his heart those who neither sought nor valued his forgiveness it was then that he became finally and completely free. This didn't mean that he condoned cruelty and oppression. It didn't mean that he wouldn't seek justice for all those persecuted as he had been. It meant that he would not permit these wrongs to define him or frame his character for the rest of his life.

Dear friends, I think that's a lesson each of us can learn and then learn again. The good that God seeks for us is found in the peace we seek with each other in Christ's name. Yet even when the peace sought turns out to be imperfect, even when mercy is not answered with repentance or mutual understanding even when we suffer alone we have still our own souls to heal, and our own lives to keep free, as God gives us the strength and the wisdom to do this.

It's not selfish to think this way. Whenever we forgive, to whom ever we forgive, however we forgive, we are liberating our own selves first. Like Mandela, we are turning from the prison cell of bitterness and sorrow into the light of true freedom and true peace. And what's more, we are allowing our lives to become again instruments of God's peace, to do the work God has given us to do as perfect as any perfect number, as blessed as any people born of love. Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +