



## **A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

Sunday, September 13, 2020

Scripture Passages: Exodus 14:19-31 & Matthew 18:21-35

+ *In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

“To err is human. To forgive is divine”

Alexander Pope – the early 18th century poet is responsible for these words. We quote them a lot. Truer words could not have been spoken. They kind of sum up the theme of our Gospel reading today.

Pope meant that erring – making mistakes, messing up - is just part of being human – and when we try to forgive the error or err-ee, we are acting in a Godly or divine way - that forgiveness is God’s m.o. – one that we pray and strive for. It’s not surprising that this charism is of God. It’s a high bar to really forgive someone.

Talking about forgiveness is so hard. For one, we live in a hard and unforgiving culture. There’s that – and then there’s the corollary to that – we live in a culture where public, outrageous wrongdoing does not even try to seek forgiveness anymore and so damage piles on damage, and right and wrong seem to be arbitrary categories now.

Or so this world would have us think. But that’s a lie. There’s another word for all of that behaviour: gaslighting.

So, here’s a reality check: we all know there is actually, objectively, demonstrably right and there is wrong behaviour.

Luckily, the picture of forgiveness in the scriptures is pretty unequivocal on the topic.

In Matthew’s Gospel, our verses this morning give us a picture of forgiveness that at first glance, actually feels more threatening than loving: a kind of “forgive or else!” feeling. But it would be dangerous for us to go down that road without some explanation – all sorts of people might allow harmful behaviour if we accepted that partial commentary.

But if you back up to say, . . . verse 12 in chapter 18, you get the whole story, the whole point of what Jesus is trying to say to the disciples about:

- community
- about God's love
- about forgiveness and inclusion
- and about how different the kingdom of God is to our world.

So, forgive me but I'm going to take us back a bit and defy the lectionary's selection of verses for this Sunday. It'll be a worthy corrective, I promise. It's really important to read the scriptures carefully.

Let's start with Jesus' original point: so first, he's talking about how to deal constructively with conflict in community to the disciples -- and then we ended up at our passage about forgiveness.

And we know these are two halves of the same conversation – there are linguistic clues: Jesus starts to speak about conflict in verse 12 saying, “if another member of the church sins against you, . . .” and our passage begins, “Then Peter came and said to him “Lord if another member of the church sins against me how often should I forgive?” It's clear that these two passages actually belong together in a single conversation so we'll treat them that way.

Peter says, should I forgive seven times? That's an answer that should have fulfilled the letter of the law very nicely thank you. But Jesus answers in a surprisingly extravagant way. He says nope – not 7 times, but 77 times. That's a ridiculous number of times to forgive someone. But he was like that.

And then he tells a parable to teach about how forgiveness works. It's also about the consequences of not forgiving – a parable that's supposed to shed light on the crucial nature of forgiveness in discipleship.

Now remember that as one scholar says, “Parables try to capture in narrative form something of what God is like and something of what God desires both for us and from us. Parables try to grab our attention, surprise us by grace, and jolt us to embrace the life God offers us that we might offer the same to others. Parables are also just one part of the story, just one sliver of the larger truth Jesus came to share, and so can't be read in isolation of the rest of the Gospel.”

That last bit about not reading them in isolation is really important lest we think that everything that needs to be said about forgiveness is supposed to be summed up in this short parable. It's not. But it is telling us how crucial it is to forgive.

And it's also important not to conflate the King with God and the slave with us. That's not the point here. That'll lead us down the wrong rabbit hole. The point is to emphasize the tremendous importance of forgiveness.

But forgiving raises so many questions – questions like:

Does forgiveness mean forgetting the wrong?

Does forgiveness mean that we let people off the hook?

Is forgiveness as costly for the forgiven as for the one who forgives?

Let's start with that third question: I think that may be what Jesus is saying about forgiveness is that it's not free on either side.

We forgive so that we do not remain in the grip of what was done to us. But it is a sacrifice to let go of the burden of the hurt that we carry; it is a sacrifice to be that generous, that vulnerable.

In the parable that Jesus teaches, it's important for us to understand - just so we get the scale of what the king has given up as he forgives the slave. Scholars tell us that one talent – one – was equal to 20 years of a slave's labour. 20 years. And the slave owed the king 10,000 talents – a vast sum worth 200,000 years of labour. It was ludicrous to think that the slave could ever pay back even a portion of that amount. And it must have represented a great sacrifice to give it up.

A vast debt. A serious sacrifice.

Which is why in the parable, Jesus stresses that the forgiven one now has a serious obligation to receive that grace knowing that they mustn't do whatever they were forgiven for ever again. They must make restitution. In that sense, forgiveness is an active thing. There's no passivity in this process. Rather it's hard work on both sides if its to be genuine, and authentic. And it is also a gift on both sides: the forgiver is released and the forgiven accepts a burden of responsibility – and the ability to move forward.

So when this same slave makes a mockery of that huge sacrifice and betrays his own forgiveness almost immediately, the king loses his cool.

I want to be very careful here to say that the forgiven one ought absolutely to have shown the same quality of mercy and forgiveness that had been shown to him. That's how Christian forgiveness works. Nobody gets off the hook. Everybody has serious work to do.

Oh boy folks, these are hard teachings. But I think it's fair to say what we learn from this parable is that forgiveness is huge in the Christian life. And the parable Jesus tells in Matthew to demonstrate this is extreme and edgy.

So. How does this strike you? Where are you at in your life with regard to forgiveness? Are there people who hold you in thrall because they've hurt you? Are you finding it difficult to sacrificially forgive someone?

And if you've hurt someone, can you truly move forward in your life without being real – and contrite – about what you've done to that person? Would it not be better to make that relationship right again?

You know, as a church, we know that we have – systemically – hurt our siblings: LGBTQ2+, Indigenous siblings, People of Colour. We've hurt our siblings when we've treated them as those inside or outside the club in our parishes. We've hurt our leaders. We've hurt the vulnerable.

To err is human. Don't we know it?

But forgiveness is the goal.

And boy is it hard to forgive each other. To forgive someone who can no longer confess the guilt perhaps because they're no longer in your life, or in this life. To forgive someone who is unaware of the hurt they've caused. To forgive someone who is unrepentant about the hurt they've inflicted and maybe who has gone on hurting others.

But the fact is, the process of actual forgiveness is the only way forward that allows a true second chance. It's the only real avenue of repair and restitution. It's the only actual way to restore a right relationship.

That's when these parables get real. Maybe that's why Jesus sounds so intense about the importance of forgiveness. Kingdom life is impossible without it.

We're faced with the great human conundrum: we're none of us good enough to make it on our own merits into the kingdom of heaven. None of us. And yet, it's also not possible to live well being endlessly held to account for our past selves – sutured to our faults and failures.

That's where we count on – for our lives, we count on God's forgiveness. On that great work on the cross that Jesus performed for our sakes. If we're going to have even a shot at forgiving others, we have to know ourselves to have been forgiven first – and constantly – by our profoundly loving God.

Because forgiveness is the only way to deal with our humanity.

We are not as morally and ethically flawless as God is. That's impossible. We none of us possess that kind of emotional and spiritual maturity. There's nothing for it but for us to be dependent on God's love and forgiveness for the stupid, hurtful and destructive things we do. But what that does mean is that unlike that ungrateful slave, we are to be constantly striving to give the same generosity to others that we've received so freely from God.

That's the Christian contract folks. Love others as you yourself have been loved.

So much to think about here. So much that's hard and so much that's right.

I'd like to end with a prayer that is close to my heart. It really does go to the heart of the matter. It's a prayer of humility and dependence and it's oh so important to keep before our eyes for our own spiritual health. It's one I keep near my desk. One that I read at least a couple of times a week. It keeps you humble. It's by the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton: let us pray:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

*+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*