

Sermon - the struggle to forgive

Based on Genesis 50.15-21, and Matthew 18.21-35 (NRSV)

The teaching context of the parable

- Before we engage with today's Gospel passage, it is appropriate to remind you of the context.
- As I pointed out last week, the whole of chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel is focused on how each gathered community of Church members should interact with each other.
- Jesus started the chapter by teaching the need for us all to be humble in our attitude towards each other, and not to consider any member to be worth less than ourselves, or - conversely - for any member to be considered more entitled than others.
- And in addition to the need to seek after those who have gone astray to bring them back into the Good Shepherd's fold, Jesus also gave us a process to prioritise reconciliation within the church community.
- And so this leads to Peter's question today, about the extent of forgiveness that we should practice.
- And Jesus' responds with the parable of the unforgiving slave.

An over the top parable

- In his parable Jesus uses hyperbole - an over the top exaggeration to make his point.
- He describes the slave as owing a billion dollars - a ridiculous amount in that the slave would have been unable to spend even one percent of that - he could not in reality have built up such a tremendous debt.
- But this serves to highlight the impossibility of the slave saying "*Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.*" (Matthew 18.26)
- It would have taken many lifetimes of work before the slave could hope to repay such a debt.
- Nevertheless, having asked for mercy, the king forgives him the entire debt: he writes it off, and bears the cost of the debt himself.
- But what does the slave then do?
- He throws a fellow slave who owed him merely a hundred denarii into the debtors prison, and shows no mercy even when asked.
- This effectively reverses his own forgiveness and brings about the unhappy consequence of his debt being reinstated.

But he was forgiven!

- We might question this reversal in the story, because we understand that when God forgives us our sins, God does not hold onto them and then lay them all in front of us the next time we sin.
- No - once we have genuinely repented of any sin, it is truly wiped away.
- So how might we understand this part of the parable?
- For me, it is simply that when we are living in alignment with God's right-wisness, and forgiving others as we ourselves are forgiven, then we are participating in the kingdom of heaven.
- But when we act out of alignment with God's right-wisness, then such unforgiving actions effectively deny us participation in the kingdom of heaven.
- The unforgiving slave's lack of mercy effectively locked him away from being able to participate in the life of his lord's kingdom.

Holding a grudge

- I want to pick up on an aspect that we understand perhaps superficially, but maybe haven't considered more deeply.
- The understanding lies in the phrase 'to hold something against someone'.

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- We usually think of holding a grudge against someone for a wrong they have done.
- Jesus calls us to forgive, but we find that hard, because we want to hold them to account, not only for them to admit they have acted wrongly, but also for them to provide restitution - to pay back the cost.
- There is certainly a place for this in terms of systemic injustice committed in the name of organisations and institutions.
- But that kind of injustice needs to be done objectively, and without holding a grudge against the perpetrators.
- I think what Jesus is talking about here is personal: in the context of personal relationships.
- And, as he describes so often, it has as much to do with the attitude of the heart as anything else.
- The kind of situation we heard about in the reading from Genesis, where Joseph could have held a grudge against his brothers for having sold him as a slave, with all the suffering he endured as a consequence -
- but made it clear that he held no grudge against them, that he had truly forgiven them.

Literal binding = spiritual binding

- But to return to the idea of holding something against someone, it's important to understand that this is something that takes time and energy: it is an active thing, not a passive thing.
- And we can engage with the meaning literally in order to understand it metaphysically, or spiritually.
- If you literally hold a piece of paper against someone, then it means that you're stuck: you're stuck holding that paper against the other person, which means that you can't easily get on with living your own life.
- It can also mean, depending on where you're holding it against them, that they can't get on with their own life either.
- It might sound silly thinking about it literally like this.
- But Jesus gave us an insight about what happens at a spiritual level.
- Remember when he said to Simon Peter: *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* (Matthew 16.19)
- And then he extended this to all his followers, to all of us, when - as we heard last week - he said: *"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* (Matthew 18.18)
- The fundamental lesson in this is understanding that whatever we enact on earth has spiritual consequences.
- So when we hold something against someone else, then we end up binding them, and ourselves.
- And, being bound, this becomes an obstacle for God's grace to impact both that other person, and ourselves.
- And when we forgive the other person - when we stop holding something against the other person - then that loosening frees them up, and frees ourselves up, so that God's grace can start flowing in that situation.

Don't forgive too quickly

- Sometimes we might read of a distressing tragedy where someone has been maimed, or abused, or killed.
- And either they, or their closest family member, immediately proclaims their forgiveness of the perpetrator - perhaps because they're a Christian and they know that that's what they're supposed to do.
- I must admit that I am sceptical of such prompt forgiveness - it seems too superficial to me.

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- I don't know what I would say in that immediate situation, but I suspect it would be more along the lines of: "I would like to forgive the perpetrator, and I hope that in due course I will reach that point. But right now it is far too soon to pronounce that - there is a lot of grieving I will need to do first."

Patient with her own unforgiveness

- Years ago in Cape Town, a woman's husband was in an aged-care facility, and he died.
- She understood that his death was preventable - that it had occurred due to the negligence of the staff.
- She blamed the staff for taking her husband away from her - she held it against them.
- But she was also a committed and faithful Christian, and she understood Christ's call to forgive.
- She was familiar with what Christ said in his Sermon on the Mount: *'So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your sister or brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your sister or brother, and then come and offer your gift.'* (Matthew 5.23-24) - and she took it seriously.
- So she kept attending church services every week, but would not take communion - because she knew that she had not forgiven those she blamed for her husband's death.
- Eventually, after many months, she reached the point where she could finally forgive them, and then started taking communion again.
- She understood what it was that Christ was calling her to do, and she faithfully waited upon God to soften her own heart.
- She understood that God was being patient, with her.
- She finally reached the point of forgiveness, and could release both those she blamed, and herself.

The struggle is real

- Jesus was fully human.
- We understand that he experienced all kinds of emotions, and struggled at times to do the right thing - to do what he was called to do.
- Just because the Gospel accounts always show him doing the right thing, does not mean that he found it easy.
- Jesus knows when we struggle, and is with us in each struggle.
- God honours the yearnings of our hearts, and the striving of our minds - as long as we *do* yearn, and *do* strive.
- As long as we respond to Jesus' call, and yearn to forgive those who have sinned against us, and strive to do so.
- As long as we take Christ's teaching seriously, and forgive - and forgive - and forgive.