

FORGIVENESS IN EVERY DIRECTION

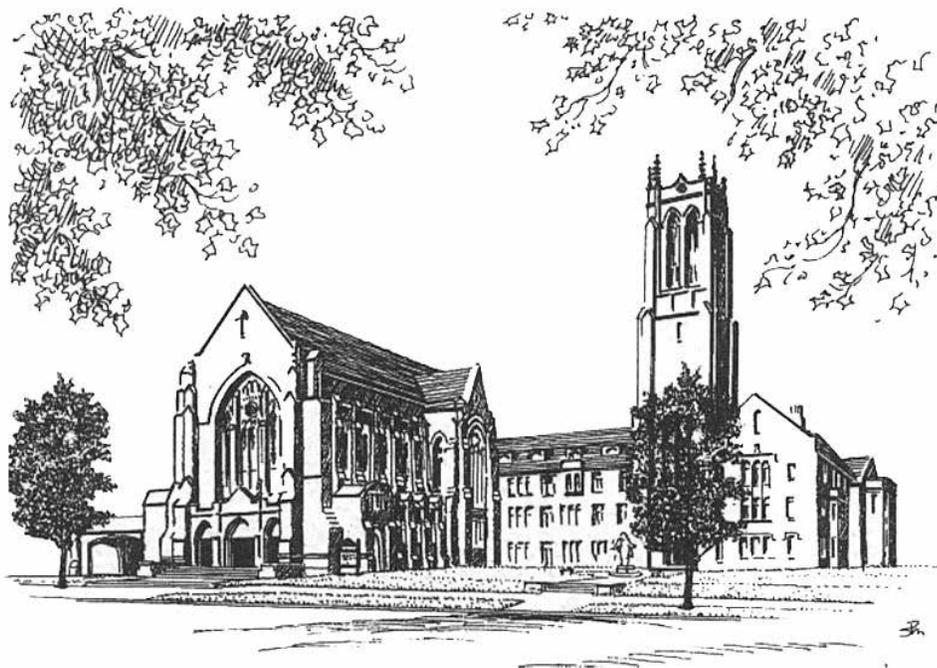
by

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Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



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Texts: Exodus 14:19-31; Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21; Romans 14:1-12; and Matthew 18:21-35

Is God on our side?

Clearly from the Old Testament reading today, God is on the side of the Hebrew slaves, the Israelites as they flee bondage.

As you know, so many people and groups, even nations, in our world today claim the mantle of God to justify all sorts of actions, claiming in essence that God is on their side.

It was Abraham Lincoln who famously said that the question is not whether God is on our side but whether we are on God's side.

And clearly God is on the side of whoever is in bondage, whoever needs to be liberated, whoever needs to be forgiven, whoever is the so-called weak or underdog, whoever is in need of grace.

This is probably why Jesus places so much responsibility on the forgiver in today's Gospel lesson.

How many of you remember or have heard of the former phenomenon known as "new math"?

For some reason today's gospel reminded me of this. I am sure there are educators and students today who remember the emergence of this in the 1960's. Like other things it was initiated after the Soviets beat the Americans to space by launching the Sputnik satellite and American ingenuity and competitiveness kicked into gear.

It was decided that American students needed their math skills to be accelerated in order to develop them into future mathematicians and scientists who could help us compete with the Soviets technologically.

So "new math" was developed as a faster way for students to develop higher math skills. It involved all sorts of new methods of arriving at mathematical conclusions.

After the 1960's new math was critiqued so harshly for its ignoring of basic mathematical foundational learning that it went out of style as a curricu-

lum. It did linger into the 70's and 80's when I entered school, even though I don't remember much about it.

70 times 70 is the new math on forgiveness, according to Jesus here. And of course the math, the number, is not the point. Understanding God's forgiving nature is at the heart of our lesson here.

Our Peter is in the center of the action again in Matthew's Gospel pressing Jesus this time about how far one's obligation goes to forgive.

Inherent in this conversation is that people need to be forgiven repeatedly, something which, if we are honest, we know is true. We are in constant need of forgiveness.

Is it good enough if I forgive someone seven times, Peter asked. That is the Biblical magic number, right?

Seven symbolized completeness, fullness, wholeness in the scriptures, and Peter understood that from his Hebrew tradition. The world's creation story was symbolized with the seven days, there are seven Jewish festivals, Joshua walked around the walls of Jericho for seven days, there were seven churches addressed in John's book of Revelation at the end of our New Testament, and so on.

The number seven is a trigger, but seven times is a lot of times to forgive someone!

Peter again is a great representative of human nature. What's the minimum I have to do, Jesus? I tried to make up with them – "I left them a message...and they never called back." I emailed them, messaged them on Facebook and s/he never got back to me. I tried, I did my part. We do well just to offer grace once and then place the responsibility back on the other.

77 times! Jesus said.

Now, what that means in the world of Facebook I don't know. In fact someone would probably think you were really weird and fanatical if you messaged them 77 times forgiving them. Which is probably why we should pick up the phone or meet someone in person for such a conversation.

Though it's not the number really, it is about one's heart and whether our capacity to forgive is deeper than religious oughts and shoulds, rules and obligations.

There is a new math when it comes to forgiveness that has nothing to do with how many numbers time how many, but that we are committed to the offering of forgiveness until we have really forgiven or until we have exhausted what we can do.

And there is usually more that we can do than what we've already done to forgive.

Interestingly, it seems to me that Jesus' focus here in this particular lesson is not whole reconciliation, although this is one step in it. Reconciliation is the next step; we can't have that until we forgive – Jesus seems here to be working on the heart of the forgiver and teaching us about the forgiving heart of God.

Offering genuine forgiveness can bring peace to the offended, peace to the victim, and is not reliant on reciprocation. This grace holds a certain power when one is able to do the forgiving regardless of response.

Jesus goes on from the new math. There is this parable. And in typical fashion for the writer of this Gospel, Jesus' words are remembered in their most stark form. We are meant to remember that this God is serious about forgiveness and grace.

As you take a look at this parable you must know that a talent is an exorbitant amount of money (15-20 years worth of wages or more) with no hope to be repaid — and it is forgiven by the master. This forgiven one in the parable though is owed what is a paltry amount in a denarii, and he can't find it within him to forgive a brother, an equal, that small amount.

The lesson and truth is clear: Our need for forgiveness is overwhelming, and God's grace is more than up to it. God is abundantly forgiving, but with it comes the expectation that we will also show such grace with others.

The parable makes clear the expectation that grace received means grace extended; that is the vision of Jesus here

The Lord's Prayer we will pray in a moment says so — forgive us our trespasses, our sins, our debts as the old King James version says — as we forgive our debtors, our sins, our trespasses.

Or as the poet Robert Frost wrote it — “Forgive me my nonsense, as I also forgive the nonsense of those that think they talk sense.”

Forgiveness in every direction is what God clearly expects.

On this week of remembrance around the 9/11 tragedy, I'm reminded of where I was on that day.

I was here, at St. Paul's. An intern in my first year. I was set to teach a young adult Bible study to begin on the 12th, a Wednesday. I had an enormous crowd come, but we set aside the material for the evening and focused instead on our shock and grief and, yes, even began to talk about ... grace.

Something like 9/11 or even the current iterations of news — ISIS and the violence overseas and our wade back in to it this week. And your experiences and mine all challenge us not to rest into cheap, shallow grace that doesn't take seriously the hurt that people have experienced.

Any time forgiveness comes up we naturally wonder with Peter if that means we must forgive the unforgivable atrocities that too many of you have had to bear?

Or does it mean that consequences for actions or for justice are wiped away?

Does it mean we can't be angry or feel what we feel anymore?

Does it mean something gets swept under the rug or pain goes unacknowledged or forgotten?

The short answer we would proclaim in the name of Jesus is No.

Forgiveness does not preclude justice; it can often shape it actually. Justice does not have one image — retributive, harsh, cruel. Justice with forgiveness can actually yield the best and most transforming kind of outcome, like

those sentenced to work with victims of the types of crimes they committed. There is much data to suggest there are better outcomes with forgiveness and justice paired together than there are with justice doled out simply for punishment sake.

You can all think of moments, experiences, stories of forgiveness that are unlikely, miraculous, and all the rest.

I recalled this week an experience of mine here in my first tour through. I served in various roles on staff but one was in the area of community and global missions. I was staff person responsible for our MacGregor Elementary mentors program, which we are recruiting for now.

During our recruitment period, which we are engaged in now, an older white man, member here, now passed on, came to see me. I remember where we sat on the pew outside the chapel having that first hard but inspiring conversation.

He confessed to me racism in his thoughts and life, wanted forgiveness, and wondered if mentoring might be an opportunity to begin again by facing it head on.

He had asked forgiveness, and I got the impression he had asked 77 times or more.

And he wanted to have a redeeming action associated with his plea. And so after conversations and intentionality on everyone's part, he was paired up with a young boy, and they enjoyed a school year together, an hour a week, reading and sharing homework and life together at the school.

I could sense very much his desire to be a servant who would extend the grace to someone else that he had been given.

I only hope I can be so full of humility and grace as this man.

I take great heart in Jesus's words from the cross, "Forgive them God, for they know not what they do."

It must have freed Jesus in some way to offer that grace, even without any immediate response from the ones who had done him great wrong.

I think that's the idea, friends.

This poem by Wendell Berry captures for me the spirit of forgiveness and grace from God of which we are speaking today. It was actually written to his Mother. Would you hear it now?

I was your rebellious son,
do you remember? Sometimes
I wonder if you do remember,
so complete has your forgiveness been.

So complete has your forgiveness been
I wonder sometimes if it did not
precede my wrong, and I erred,
safe found, within your love,

prepared ahead of me, the way home,
or my bed at night, so that almost
I should forgive you, who perhaps
foresaw the worst that I might do,

and forgave before I could act,
causing me to smile now, looking back,
to see how paltry was my worst,
compared to your forgiveness of it

already given. And this, then,
is the vision of that Heaven of which
we have heard, where those who love
each other have forgiven each other,

where, for that, the leaves are green,
the light a music in the air,
and all is un-entangled,
and all is undismayed.

We the church in this corner center ourselves on this heavenly vision of grace extended and received, a grace which is ultimately and finally the greatest act of love we could ever know or share.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Most Sunday sermons also are available via the church website, www.stpaulshouston.org, as well as pre-printed and on CD. Access the sermons on the website via either the Worship section or the Media Center. The pre-printed sermons are in the information rack at the Jones Plaza entrance to the Sanctuary Building. To order a \$5 CD of the complete worship service, contact Phyllis Brockermeier at 713-528-0527 or pbrock@stpaulshouston.org.