

Episcopal Church

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 19A

September 17, 2023

A Sermon by the Rev. Joseph Parrish

“Is it just not right?”

DRAFT

The Holy Gospel according to

Matthew 18:21-35

Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to

him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the

lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that

had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Dear Lord, we live in a time and place where forgiveness is not the norm. May we be the ones to strive to forgive one another as you have forgiven us and to make this effort a part of our common society. Amen.

A number years ago I was asked to officiate at a New York City church meeting of a group of relatives of victims of murder and other violent crimes. It was a large turnout of people from many walks of life and conditions. Most were quite subdued and seemed very

preoccupied with their thoughts. As the afternoon progressed we went from the church service out onto the church patio for refreshments. I heard of several stories of people who had lost sisters or brothers, mothers or fathers, children, and so on because of senseless violent crimes. There were feelings harbored that would make one cringe. "How to get justice done," was on many people's minds. "How could I be the victim?" some seemed to ask. "Why did it happen to me and my family?" "How do these people seem to get away with it?"

Others were still grieving from a loss many years before. But off in the distance I saw the smile of a woman whose face shone like a bright light in a dark night. I nodded toward her and asked someone nearby who she was. "Oh, her young child had been murdered," was the reply. And my response, "Why is she smiling so?" To which the person said, "She thinks her child is with Jesus." She had found forgiveness in her heart, and she herself had been healed and now was trying to help others in similar circumstances.

I read of a pastor whose sister was killed at college by a jealous roommate. A second roommate was also murdered. And then the murderer turned the gun on herself. The pastor said that the most difficult thing for him is that he had no one to seek retribution from, no one to blame. And the lack of a target for his feelings of loss and anger made his reconciliation with the loss of his dear older sister just that more difficult.

Forgiveness, true heartfelt forgiveness, is extremely rare. However, many have found it is quite healing. A survey of the Gallup organization a number of years ago measured a quantity they called the "hostility index." The top five cities with the highest "hostility index" were Philadelphia, New York City, Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit. At the bottom of the hostility index list were Des Moines, Minneapolis, Denver, Seattle, and Honolulu. Then the study noted that the highest death rate correlated with the highest hostility

index. Hostile feelings lead to early death.

New York City policeman Steven McDonald was a quadriplegic. He was paralyzed in July 1986 from his neck down by three bullets from the gun of Shavod Jones, a fifteen-year-old bicycle thief in Central Park in New York City. After Shavod's imprisonment they found reconciliation with each other over time. And officer McDonald found that forgiveness was a tremendous release for him, even though he was debilitated.

Officer Steven spent his time traveling to trouble spots like Northern Ireland, seeking to be a force for reconciliation between two opposing factions. He said, "It is enough to change the heart and mind of one person."

How do we find the peace that passes all understanding in our lives? If someone has wronged us in the past, it is not easy to forgive, and it is often impossible to forget. Billy Graham said he could do the one thing that God cannot do—Billy said he could

remember those he forgave who had sinned against him. But God hears our cries of contrition and not only forgives us, but forgets our sins. What a God!

The apostle Peter thought he was going way above the requirements of the law by suggesting he forgive an offender seven times. The rabbis said three times was sufficient forgiveness. Peter doubled that and added one for good measure--seven times, forgive seven times. But Jesus threw that idea out completely when he directed forgiveness

of either seventy-seven times, or according to other translators, four hundred and ninety times. And who will be taking the tally that long? In other words, such forgiveness is complete and God-like.

Ghandi, the Indian pacifist, once said that if the Old Testament dictum of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth were carried out in earnest that the whole world would soon be blind and toothless!

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The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu made a bold move to withhold all judgements from those who had imposed apartheid on black South Africans. Against all presuppositions that the courts would be clogged forever by those seeking justice for the injustices they had suffered for a lifetime, Bishop Tutu advocated and convinced the new government not to seek revenge, and his convictions were upheld.

We have in today's gospel lesson Jesus' warning of Peter to forgive seven times seventy times, or in other words to give unlimited forgiveness. How does that compare with the way our society works? How can Jesus possibly be right?

The parable of the unforgiving servant is one that concerns us at least at first. The lord seems to renege on his offer of clemency. We fear God could do something similar. But the parable is

not an allegory. The lord in this parody is not a figure we can identify with God. However, the extremes of the parable are exemplary of the feelings God has about our inabilities to forgive those whom also have been created in God's image.

There are boundaries of laws and commandments as we heard recently that we have been given the right to bind or loose a commandment; but we do this to our own peril if we do not have sufficient wisdom in our decisions. If we open up a door where a serious crime has been

committed by someone, we can rarely be sure they will not commit such a crime again. Yet, the courts are constantly called upon to rule on whether a crime can be exonerated by a short or long term sentence. And even the definition of a crime is a challenge in today's American society in too many places.

If you read the Episcopal daily devotional booklet *Forward Day by Day* a number of years ago, a person who had been convicted of being an accomplice to murder when he was seventeen years old

was writing the monthly devotions from inside a prison; he possibly thought this would show he had been repentant, but again and again he was denied release. Finally, after all his self-imposed efforts came to an end, the court granted his release, and he now works in a drug rehabilitation facility as a counsellor. It is never easy or even possible to get forgiveness from a secular society that has been offended. But of course we Christians live in the knowledge that when a completely innocent person is charged of a serious crime, probably a

crime of treason, their life was ended in spite of their innocence. The innocent Christ was crucified. This has happened many times in our own country and in others when a person convicted of the capital crime of murder is executed, only later to find out that the wrong person had been convicted. The result has been that there is a nationwide effort to end the death penalty; the death penalty was removed several decades ago in the US, but then it was re-imposed, and hundreds were executed, again without certainty, and many of these cases have been

shown later to have been a mistake. But society's unforgiveness is not Christ's. Our society would rather give the power to each state to decide what it will do, making the whole national problem of execution somewhat of a farce. It depends on where a crime is committed as to how it will be punished by taking or not taking a prisoner's life.

The Episcopal Church has over and over again affirmed the decision of no more capital executions, but several of our Dioceses are adamant that they do not follow the lead of the Episcopal Church.

So a number of Episcopal Christians strongly disagree on capital punishment. However, today's gospel text affirms what the Episcopal Church has affirmed and reaffirmed. But we are very swayed by society, and oftentimes we are less motivated by the Good News of Jesus Christ than by human laws.

Yet, in spite of human failure, nearly half of all states in the United States have now again stopped executions, either by law or by practice.

May we find Jesus in our heart this day and this week as well. And may he melt us, mold us, mend us, use us to be a reconcilers for the world out there as well as the world in here, in our own hearts. We need to be more forgiving, for in that way we reassume the godlike nature we had at our creation. Then God will smile on us. Amen.

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Tags:

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