

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 19

September 13, 2020

Year A RCL

Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103: 8-13; Matthew 18:21-35

“I tell you, seventy-seven times”

By: The Rev. Fr. Fabian Villalobos

We continue our journey reading the gospel of Matthew. Last week we heard how the sin of a single person affects the whole body of the church since we are all connected and dependent on others, and *“how where two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, He will be there among them.”* Today, we learn why it is important to have forgiveness in the day to day interactions with others as we live in community. We reflect on how asking to receive forgiveness becomes a fundamental part of our spiritual life.

Peter asks Jesus, *“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”* It is important to mention that the translation of the Bible we use in our lectionary page from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, translates “member of the church” while most of the other Bible translations use “my brother” which I also prefer. It is necessary to mention this language clarification to indicate that forgiveness is not limited to

the relationships among church members, but rather this is necessary in all human interaction.

Peter wants to hear an amount, a quantity in numbers that he can track and manage. How often? Seven times? Frequently, human beings have the temptation of reducing divine realities into dimensions that are counted and controlled. Like forgiving seven times which seems reasonable and possible when we see forgiveness from a human perspective.

Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Jesus' answer is a reminder that human realities we think we know and manage, have also a divine dimension which is deeper, unknown to us, and is connected with God. This is why realities like compassion, love, harmony, peace, forgiveness, and many others cannot be reduced only to mere human activities, because they are expressions of the being of God that continues working and being present in the world through these and many other realities always around us. All these divine attributes are evident especially in the human relationships.

"Seventy-seven times" means forever. We are called to imitate God who offers His forgiving love over and over no matter the size of our offense or sin. By emphasizing always to forgive in our relationship with others. then we become

like God, forgiving, and loving. Dispensing and passing the same forgiveness we receive and enjoy from God; He is the only source of true forgiveness.

Forgiveness has a double movement, that of asking to be forgiven, and giving or offering forgiveness to someone. Both movements require humility, maturity, love, and the consciousness to recognize that as humans we regularly make mistakes, we sin and thus offend God and others. Therefore, when Jesus mentions “*seventy-seven times*”, He is showing how God’s mercy has no limits. Since God treats us this way, we too should be merciful to others.

Nonetheless sometimes, humans want to receive, enjoy, and keep the grace of forgiveness only for themselves. In answering to Peter, Jesus mentions the parable of the servant that received forgiveness from the king who forgave all the debts the servant owned but was incapable to do the same. The servant did not forgive a fellow servant who asked him to pardon a small debt.

The big difference in the quantities of debts they both have reflects how, the more we receive the more we are asked to give back, and that all amounts are equal in front of the grace of God. Big or small amounts are forgiven the same; and we are called to do likewise “*seventy-seven times*”.

The fact that Peter is asking, how often should I forgive? and that the parable mentions two servants with different amount in debts reminds us that as

humans we always need the grace of forgiveness because we are always in debt to God. Forgiveness is not an isolated experience we have alone, it is instead a powerful expression of human interaction that belongs to God. It is received and borrowed over and over all our life in all our human relationships *“seventy-seven times”*.

The refusal to pass and share the forgiveness we received from God makes of us “wicked slaves” just as the king called the unforgiving servant that received forgiveness, and then denied forgiveness to his fellow slave the freedom of the debt. Each time we stop the double movement of the forgiveness only receiving without giving, or giving without receiving, we become wicked slaves of ourselves and make a mockery of the image of the forgiving God in ourselves.

The failure to share the forgiveness leads then to torture and brings the destruction of a person as we see in the slave that acted selfishly thus provoking the anger of the king.

“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.”

“Seventy-seven times” is the measurement God uses with us. We too need to forgive *“seventy-seven times”* from our hearts if want to continue experiencing the compassion and mercy of our Lord and King. Amen.