

Sermon, Proper 19, 2020

Reflecting on the scriptures for last Sunday and today, I couldn't help thinking about the opening verse of a song sung by the Eagles:

I turn on the tube and what do I see
A whole lotta people cryin' "Don't blame me"
They point their crooked little fingers at everybody else
Spend all their time feelin' sorry for themselves
Victim of this, victim of that
Your momma's too thin; your daddy's too fat
Get over it
Get over it
All this whinin' and cryin' and pitchin' a fit
Get over it, get over it

I don't know about you, but I have to confess that I'm spending a lot of 2020 dwelling on things -- stewing about them -- instead of "getting over" them, and I've realized that I've been kind of angry. I'm not sure who or what I'm angry at or about, but mostly, it's a simmering anger, sometimes just below the surface, sometimes tucked away down deep, but occasionally bursting to the surface.

Mostly it's about the pandemic and all the things we're missing. More recently, it's about the fires. And then, there's all the politics of the craziest election year I can ever remember. And I know I'm not alone -- tolerance and mutual respect seem to be things hard to come by in 2020.

It's not difficult for anyone to find someone to focus that anger on: politicians, bureaucrats, rioters, hypocrites, and -- did I mention politicians? It's not difficult to build up to the sort of anger which, if we're not careful, will blur the distinction between

actually seeking justice for all, and instead acting out with hatred against the perceived offender.

And Jesus says to forgive all that! Forgive over and over? He's got to be kidding, right?

These two gospels, last Sunday's and this one, are all about reconciliation and forgiveness. Getting over it. Moving on.

God wants us to be joyful, to be glad, and to be encouraged, and I know he wants us to grow in our faith. But Jesus is telling us that we can't be or do any of those things well while we are carrying a load of anger and resentment. Two of the greatest destroyers of souls are guilt and anger. Sometimes they are linked – sometimes they grow out of separate events. But, as a general rule, the two emotions feed on each other.

Anger is a natural emotion. It's not wrong to feel anger. What's wrong and not helpful to our growth as an individual and as a Christian, is holding on to anger without seeking reconciliation. What's wrong is seeking justice without *granting* justice. And we only need to watch the news from cities all over the country to see what unrestrained and unrepentant anger can do to a city or a neighborhood, and how unwillingness or inability to forgive can torment a soul and drive a person to do awful things.

It's my strong belief that the rules for living Jesus sets out for us are primarily for our own good and for our own happiness. I believe that it is just an added blessing that

obeying these rules will benefit the objects of our forgiveness, our friends and our family, or our enemies.

I read that forgiveness brings “enormous benefits to the person who gives that gift, . . . If you can bring yourself to forgive and forget, [studies suggest] you are likely to enjoy lower blood pressure, a stronger immune system, and a drop in the stress hormones circulating in your blood,”¹ Makes sense, doesn’t it?

Today’s Gospel Lesson segues from last week’s lesson about reconciliation. Today, Peter asks a familiar question. He wants to know just how forgiving a Christian must be. Jesus answers, really, really, really, forgiving! Not just seven times, but seventy-seven times. A child might translate it a “Gazillion times”. What Jesus means is that Christian duty toward one another – and toward God – is to simply forgive, get over it, get on with it.

Jesus illustrates the importance of forgiveness with the parable about the unforgiving debtor. It is not difficult to see that the King in the parable is God, who has forgiven an immense debt owed by his servant. One talent alone was worth more than fifteen years’ wages of a laborer. Thus, the debt was over 150,000 years of wages -- which might as well be translated as a Gazillion dollars.

The point is clear, God is totally forgiving of all our sins; he simply loves us too much to hold them against us. **BUT**, if we can’t find it in our heart to forgive our

¹ WebMD

neighbor even for a small debt, how can we have the type of relationship with God that will permit us to enjoy his forgiveness of our indebtedness to Him. Remember the words of our Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" The writer of Ecclesiasticus sums it up pretty well, "Does anyone harbor anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord? If one has no mercy toward another like himself, can he then seek pardon for his own sins?"

St. Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome, was speaking of something akin to forgiveness; he was preaching tolerance. He was addressing that sort of squabbling that was a feature of the early church. What practices were acceptable to Christians even though not within the Jewish law? Those Christians who were Jews argued for adherence to the law, the keeping of the Sabbath, and the refusal to eat unclean foods. The Gentiles on the other hand, with encouragement from Paul, saw relief from the literalness of the law in the Grace of God. Paul believed that Jesus Christ had overcome all these obstacles for us, but he cautioned the Christians in Rome to be tolerant, and not let these differences divide the community, for their primary obligation was to worship God.

When Jesus was asked for the greatest commandment, he replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." But he didn't stop there, he added, "The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself."

The complete Christian must hold *both* God and his fellow humans in almost the same awe, love, and respect. Seventy-seven times is a lot. I think Jesus knew that, but he's simply asking us to model his own forgiveness in our relationships with others.

Jesus' talk of like-for-like punishment for the one who does not forgive is simply an accurate statement of what happens to us when we don't let go of a hurt or insult. It's unhealthy for us to hold onto that grudge. What is healthy for us is to try to model the depth of God's forgiveness, even if we can't match it. Retribution is not justice.

A story I've told before, is about two shopkeepers who hated one another. An angel of the Lord came to the first shopkeeper with a promise to grant one wish no matter how extravagant. There was only one catch: whatever he received, the *rival* shopkeeper would receive two-fold. The shopkeeper thought for a moment and then replied: My wish is that you would strike me blind in one eye!

So, next time you are confronted with an insult or injury inflicted on you by someone, what will it be? Giving up an eye to make the trespasser lose two? Or forgiving the trespasser, letting it go, and keep your whole eyesight and your soul?

It's not easy. There's a C. S. Lewis quote I've always admired, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive."

Forgiving isn't just the nice thing to do, not simply the Christian thing to do; it's what must be done to be a complete, whole, person.

As Christians, we seek to be more like Him. It's a difficult task, but he knows what will make us happy, and what will help us grow in our faith. Forgiveness, like every other worthwhile skill, takes practice.

“Every time we enter this sanctuary, we have a symbol of the forgiveness that has been extended to us. It is the cross. Accept the grace that is offered to you this morning and then, in the name of that One who has forgiven you a debt, which you cannot possibly repay, extend grace [and forgiveness] to others.²

Dear Jesus, help us forgive when everything inside us tells us not to. Help us to let go when our heart is so wounded that we feel it's breaking. Teach us to make the best of all the painful circumstances in our lives and help us love the people who hurt us as You love us all, although we hurt You every day by our words, thoughts and actions. Give us the inner strength to heal and not to break, to comfort and not to destroy, to repay good for evil and love for hatred. And last, but not least, make our faith stronger, so that we can cope with all of our times of pain in the future. For You are the only help we've got and in You we put all our trust now and forever. AMEN

² What to Do When You're Messed Over, Brad Braxton