

FORGIVENESS? OR JUSTICE?

(03/11/12)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 18:21-22
Colossians 3:12-17

“Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” (Col. 3:13)

Two weeks ago, at the beginning of the Lenten season, we looked at the role that forgiveness plays in our relationship with God, or more specifically in God’s relationship with us. We questioned whether the covenant that God established with Israel, a covenant which could be broken by either party, was the best way to describe the New Testament understanding of our relationship with God. When Jesus talks about our relationship with God he seems to do so more in the framework of the kind of relationship a parent would offer to his/her child than the framework of a covenant.

I believe this is the central teaching contained in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son walked away from his father and squandered his inheritance in dissolute living. If the Greek word for sin, *’armartea*, should be translated as “missing the mark,” the son has indeed missed the mark. He has been living in sin. His life has been off center. He has been lost, dwelling in darkness. The parable describes how the father responds to the son when the son comes to his senses and repents.

The father does not seem to frame the relationship in terms of sin and forgiveness. He frames it in terms of an unconditional love. The son does not need to be forgiven because the father does not hold his sin against him. The father holds the son with a “love that will not let him go.” He welcomes his son back with open arms.

The second part of the parable is about the elder son’s response to his brother’s return and their father’s celebration. The elder son expresses no joy at his brother’s return. He does not run up to him and throw his arms around him. He does not even seek out his brother to welcome him back. This is the case even though the younger son has not “sinned” against his brother but only against their father.

The elder son is annoyed that his father is so gracious in welcoming back the repentant sinner. He is annoyed that his father is so happy about his son’s return. The elder son wants justice. When you screw up, you should be punished. When you squander your inheritance, you should not receive another portion. You *should* become like one of the hired hands.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son illustrates the themes of love, justice, and forgiveness in the context of our understanding of God. If God is like the father, then we are like one of the sons. Are we the child who “sinned against heaven and against his father,” who is not worthy to be called a child of God? Or are we like the child who has played by the rules, who has lived a good and moral life, the child who asks for justice rather than forgiveness for those who have “missed the mark?” Or are we like both?

God is commonly described as a just God. This would seem to mean that God gives individuals and nations what they deserve, the just consequences of their actions. There are times in the Old Testament where this seems to be the case. There are other times, e.g., in the Book of Job, where God seems both unfair and cruel. There is no sense of justice in the tribulations that God inflicted on Job and on his family.

If we read this rule of justice backwards, we might be led to the conclusion that the 21,000 who lost their lives in the tsunami that devastated Japan a year ago simply got what they deserved. This past week the principal of a school in a Japanese village suggested as much when he stated his belief that his students' deaths were actually their "destiny." Not surprisingly, the children's parents did not find this comforting. For most of us, such an understanding of God's justice is unacceptable because it is not congruent with the understanding of God that was given to us by and in Jesus.

This morning I would like us to think about our desire, our quest for justice. To be sure, we want justice to be meted out in our courts. But do we want God to give each of us the reward or punishment we deserve? The elder son was either righteous enough or believed he was righteous enough to request this of his father. If we go down this road, however, the focus in our relationship with God is drawn back once again to an emphasis on sin and on either forgiveness or atonement. However, is this really the best way to frame our relationship with God?

Two years ago in our spiritual study and growth group we read the Christian novel *The Shack* by William P. Young. In this novel, a father (Mack) struggles with his anger, his guilt, his depression, and his inability to forgive the man who abducted, raped and killed his youngest daughter (Missy). The tragic effect of Missy's loss is compounded by Mack's emotional state, which threatens to rend the family asunder.

I won't spoil the book for you in case you haven't read it, but suffice it to say that the novel raises the issue of forgiveness in an especially poignant way. It raises the question of whether all sins *can* be forgiven, of whether all sins *should* be forgiven. It raises the question of whether we can and should forgive someone who does not ask for forgiveness. This is not an abstract theological question. In my counseling practice I find that many individuals and couples struggle to resolve this issue in relation to their parents, their spouse, or even themselves, often with tragic consequences.

On a social level justice is certainly important. Peace without justice is not true peace. If we do not have a just society, we betray both our heritage and our ideals. Men and women, whites and blacks, heterosexuals and homosexuals deserve equal justice and rights before the law. We believe that justice is built in to the fabric of the universe and that we are called to actualize this in our lives, our nation, and the world.

When it comes to the matter of individual relationships, however, this matter becomes more complex. As recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, Peter asks Jesus for guidance concerning his relationship with his brother, not with society as a whole.

It is interesting that the Greek word that was translated as "brother" in the King James, the Revised Standard Version, and the Jerusalem Bible is translated in the New

Revised Standard Version as “member of the church.” In the parallel passage in Luke, the word that was translated as “brother” is now translated as “disciple.” Although it is possible that a fellow disciple was getting on Peter’s nerves, it is unlikely that he would use the word “sin” to describe what a fellow disciple did to him. With regard to “member of the church,” although it is an excellent guideline for life within the church, it was probably not meant as such since there was no church at the time of this conversation.

So let’s assume that the conflict is between Peter and his biological brother. Let us assume that Peter’s brother has repeatedly wronged him. As you know, this can happen within a family. It is not uncommon for unconscious patterns to be acted out time and time again. We don’t know what the brother actually did. We assume he repeatedly caused Peter some kind of emotional distress. We also assume that the brother repented and felt sorry for what he had done, for he asks Peter for forgiveness.

We do know that Peter feels like a victim. He believes he has been wronged. He then asks Jesus if he is justified in breaking off the relationship. He raises the question of whether there are some sins or multiple of sins that should not be forgiven.

The way Peter describes the situation may be accurate, but the way he sees it locks him into a state of mind that is not spiritually helpful. First, he sees himself as a victim. As he does this, he constantly reminds himself how he has been wronged. He not only brings the past back to mind, he defines himself in terms of the past. His second focus is on justice. Peter feels he didn’t deserve what was done to him. He may very well be correct in this assertion. But this makes it difficult for him to let it go.

If we see ourselves as a victim, as one who deserves justice, it locks us into the past in such a way that it determines our feelings in the present. We may retain the anger we originally felt at the offense, the hurt or betrayal. If it is a self-righteous anger, which of course we always believe it is, it will smolder for many years, perhaps forever. We may even seek revenge. We want to even the score, tip the scale the other way.

Like Peter, we may be tempted to break off the relationship. This may or may not punish the other person. It will certainly lessen the probability of the person hurting us again. It is a protective stance. It is a defense against being or feeling vulnerable. In order to justify turning our back on our brother or sister, however, we need to keep the original hurt alive, if even in our minds. So we keep bringing it back. The act of doing this, of not forgiving or forgetting, locks us into the role of a victim seeking justice.

When Jesus tells Peter he should forgive his brother not seven times but seventy times seven, he may have been feeling compassion for Peter’s brother. It is also possible that Jesus was feeling compassion for Peter. He might have been thinking that it was not good for Peter to hold onto the hurts and injustices of the past. When he does, he may retaliate by hurting his brother; he may repay a hurt for a hurt. There is no doubt, however, that holding onto the hurts and injustices of the past will hurt Peter. It will hurt him emotionally, spiritually, and perhaps even physically.

Jesus tells us that God does not seek justice; he seeks relationship. In the service of relationship, he forgives us. He forgives us not seven times, but seventy times seven. Jesus tells us that as God forgives us, so also we should forgive each other. Not because we value justice, but because we value relationship.

If God can accept us and love us with all our weaknesses, our insensitivity, our selfishness, that part of us which Jung called “the shadow,” then we should accept and love our brothers and sisters in all their humanity as well. Remember, God accepts both the errant son and the self-righteous elder brother. Jesus accepts both the Pharisee and the tax collector who go to the temple to pray. The tax collector, because he owns his sin and because he repents, is the one who finds a deeper inner peace.

If we look not only at Jesus’ teachings about forgiveness but also at his life, we see that he not only talked the talk, he walked the walk. He forgave the religious and secular authorities that were responsible for his death. As he was hanging on the cross, he asked God to forgive those who had wronged him. He did not ask for justice. He asked that even those who did not know enough to repent might still be forgiven.

If Jesus could forgive the religious authorities that were threatened by his teaching and the secular authorities that were threatened by his power, if he could forgive the Roman soldiers who were just doing their job, we should forgive each other. Don’t you think Jesus forgave Peter for his weakness in denying that he even knew his Lord? Don’t you think that he forgave Judas for his misguided betrayal?

The Dalai Lama, the religious leader of Tibet who is living in exile in India, was once asked why he was not angry at the Chinese people and why he did not advocate violent resistance to the occupation. Following the invasion of Tibet in 1950, the Chinese killed over two million Tibetans. They destroyed six thousand monasteries, killed the monks and nuns, burned the sacred scriptures, and melted down the statues. They are destroying the Tibetan culture by teaching only Chinese history and only the Chinese language in the Tibetan schools. Through their policies of population transfer they are making the Tibetan people a minority in their own land. They are committing genocide against the Dalai Lama’s people, those whom he loves.

The Dalai Lama replied that it was true that the Chinese had taken all these things from him. Why should he also allow them to take away his soul? Why should he also allow them to take away his sense of inner peace? This does not mean that he does not work tirelessly to minister to the Tibetans who are living in exile, to raise consciousness through the United Nations about what has happened and is continuing to happen in Tibet. He has not given up the hope that Tibet will become at least an autonomous province of China if not once again a free land. But he does not do so with anger in his heart. He does not seek revenge. He seeks healing, and he will do nothing that will hurt the process of that healing.

Forgiveness is about letting go. It is about letting go of the past. We may be correct in our memory of what happened in the past, but we still may need to let it go. If we don’t, it will not only hurt our relationship with our brother or sister, it will poison our

soul. From this point of view, I think both the Dalai Lama and Jesus would answer the question posed in *The Shack* by saying that there are no sins that cannot be forgiven. In those cases where we do search for justice, we can do so with love in our hearts.

There is a Buddhist saying that captures what I am trying to say. According to this saying: "Forgiveness is finally letting go of all hope for a better past." We want the past to be different. We believe we deserve it to be different. But we need to abandon this quixotic quest if we are to live and love in the present. When our desire for justice begins to shade over into the desire or need for revenge, it not only locks us into the past, it poisons our soul.

Jesus tells Peter that he should forgive his brother – not seventy times but seventy times seven. Paul tells the members of his church that they should "bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." Every time we do this, we actualize a little bit of the kingdom of God right here on earth and also in our hearts.

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