

FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS -- AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS

(03/18/12)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 18:21-35

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (Mt. 18:35)

This morning we are continuing our Lenten series on the religious dimension and the psychological implications of forgiveness. This is an important theme in our relationship with God or, more specifically, in God’s relationship with us. It is also an important theme in our interpersonal relationships – with our parents, with our husband or wife, and with our brother or sister. In all of these realms or parts of our life, Jesus offers us not only the possibility of forgiveness but also the possibility of healing.

In the scripture lesson that we read last week and also again this week, Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive a church member who has sinned. Jesus tells Peter that he should forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times. In another translation, Jesus tells Peter that he should forgive seventy times seven (which is 490).

The Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas once suggested that the antidote to hate is not love, but forgiveness. If this is indeed the case, then forgiveness is one of the paths that can lead to our experience of the kingdom of heaven.

Thomas tells us that hate is a poison. I think we would agree with him on this. Hate fills our life with a dark and destructive set of feelings. When we hate, the hate hurts us much more than it does the person whom we hate. We carry that hate within us every minute of the day; the person whom we hate seldom if ever encounters it. In fact, the person may not even know that we hate him/her or, even worse, may not really care.

When I first encountered this teaching of Thomas Aquinas I found it interesting but thought that it didn’t apply to me. I was taught that it is not good to hate. I confess that I do find some people annoying or irritating. There are some people that I simply do not like. There are some people whom I would not choose to accompany me in a trip across the country in a car with no radio or cd player. But I don’t really hate anyone.

This past summer I read a book by the Tibetan Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman. The book was an account of his trek around Mt. Kailas, the sacred mountain that I

circumambulated the last time I was in Tibet, and his teachings on the spiritual practice of “The Blade Wheel of Mind Reform” to those who accompanied him on this pilgrimage.

In one of his talks Thurman explains the Tibetan Buddhist belief that hate is not an isolated feeling or emotion but is the name for a general category of feelings or emotions. Thurman suggests that annoyance, irritation, anger, and resentment are all variations or subcategories of hate.

I admit I was quite skeptical when I first read this. I can see where resentment, which I understand to be a lingering, smoldering, often unexpressed anger might be a variation of hate, a subcategory of hate, but do anger, annoyance, and irritation fall into the same category? I had my doubts about this.

Then I began to think about the Buddhist teaching from a Christian perspective. From a Christian perspective love is the opposite of hate. Jesus tells us that we should love our enemies. It is interesting that both Thomas and the Tibetan Buddhists show us how we might get from hate to love: they tell us that the path leads through forgiveness.

If love is the opposite of hate, then perhaps love is also a larger category within which we should place other feelings or emotions. Perhaps caring is simply a variation or a subcategory of love. Sympathy, empathy, and compassion may be simply variations or subcategories of love. Friendship may be nothing more than a special kind of love.

If this is true, then there may be two main emotions -- love and hate, and many emotions that are variations or partial expressions of these two. From an ontological point of view, the two fundamental realities of life and of the universe may be love and hate. From the testimony of the Bible, both of these fundamental emotions appear to be characteristic of God, to be integral parts of God’s nature. According to the testimony of the Bible, God both loves and hates. When God is patient or impatient, pleased or displeased, these may be subcategories of the fundamental polarity of love and hate that the ancient Israelites experienced in God.

Let’s think for just a minute about Thomas’s teaching regarding the importance of forgiveness as an antidote to the poison of hate. When we say that we can’t stand certain people, that we resent them, that we are constantly angry with them, but we don’t actually hate them and therefore we don’t need to forgive them, we may be throwing away a valuable tool, a valuable antidote to a wide range of poisonous emotions within us.

Let's go back to our scripture lesson. Jesus is teaching Peter about relationships, about building and maintaining Christian community. Whether we translate the Greek word as "brother," "disciple," or "member of the community," there is no doubt that Jesus cares about community. He cares about relationships. He cares about the church. But he also cares about us as individuals. We need to remember that this particular passage is included in Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven can be understood as a state of affairs in the world, a time when people will live in peace and harmony with each other, a time when "the wolf will lie down with the lamb." As Christians and as a Christian church we want to do our part to bring about the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven on earth. However, the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven can also refer to an inner spiritual reality.

The kingdom of heaven is the experience of being with God, being in God. It involves being centered in Christ and living our life out of that center. It is an experience of heaven, an experience of eternity right here and now. This is a present or a potential experience for each and every one of us. It may also be our experience after we die, depending of course on whether we experienced the kingdom of heaven, lived out of it, and helped to make it a reality in our lifetime.

The kingdom of heaven is an experience of peace, joy, and love. Jesus tells us how to experience this, how to "dwell within" the kingdom of heaven. He tells us how important forgiveness is to the realization of this profound religious experience and state of being. He tells us there are two dimensions to this experience of forgiveness. One is God's forgiveness, and how our experience of that forgiveness can lead to a deeper relationship with God. The second is our forgiveness of others, and the experience of how that forgiveness can lead to compassion and love for our brothers and sisters.

In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, which we heard this morning, Jesus tells us that the two are inextricably intertwined.

The servant owes his master 10,000 talents. This is a lot of money. It is the equivalent of fifteen years' wages of a laborer. We wonder how he came to owe his master so much. Was it bad luck? Was it the result of mismanagement? In any event, the servant carries a huge debt, a debt that is beyond his capacity to repay.

When we think of our relationship with God, we can see that this could very easily happen. When we have bad habits like impatience, anger, or a tendency to be judgmental, we inflict the pain of our mental state on people every day. A Buddhist would tell us that every time we do this we are building up bad karma. Believe me, we can build up an awful lot of bad karma very quickly in this lifetime. From this point of view, it is not much of a stretch to believe that the servant (us) could owe the master (God) so much that the debt cannot be repaid. We have not been good stewards of this life that God has given us, including our care for God's other children.

The servant begs his lord for patience. He asks for time to repay the debt. The lord releases his servant and forgives the debt. The lord wipes the servant's slate clean.

How *should* the servant feel? A tremendous weight has been lifted from his shoulders. The servant should feel both gratitude and love. This should lead to sympathy, empathy, and compassion for those who find themselves deeply in debt, who through either bad luck or the mismanagement of their lives have dug themselves a deep hole.

But how *does* the servant feel? His lack of gratitude is apparent. He encounters a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii. This is the equivalent of a day's wages for a laborer. This pales in comparison to the debt that the servant owed to his lord.

The servant is apparently untouched by the grace, the freely given gift of his lord. He demands payment of the fellow servant. The indebted servant asks for pity, for time, for patience. The servant shows his debtor no compassion. He has him thrown into prison and demands that he repay the debt in full.

When the other servants see what has happened, they tell the lord. The lord calls his servant in and confronts him on his lack of mercy. He then demands payment of his debt in full. When the servant is unable to pay, the lord throws him in jail. A Buddhist would call this karma. What goes around comes around. When we don't forgive others, we have no right to ask for or expect forgiveness. We don't deserve forgiveness.

Then Jesus tells his listeners, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister *from your heart*."

Jesus tells us that God's forgiveness of us is dependent on our ability, our willingness to forgive others. If we demand justice of others, we should expect justice to be demanded of us by God. If we show mercy to others, God will show mercy to us.

As we noted last week, most of want God to treat us mercifully rather than justly. We would rather be held in the arms of a loving parent than in the arms of a scale of justice. In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "forgive us our debts *as we* forgive our debtors." *As we* forgive our debtors. Think about it. This is a pretty heavy statement.

When we pray this prayer, we are asking God to forgive us *to the extent* that we forgive others – no more, no less. If we do not forgive others their trespasses, we have no right to expect God to forgive ours. If we do not forgive others when they offend us, we cannot ask God to forgive our sin. This makes our forgiveness of others very important, not only for the restoration of relationship, but also for our own souls. If we are unable or unwilling to forgive, we can never experience the kingdom of heaven.

People sometimes say, "I can forgive but I will never forget." I am skeptical if this is really forgiveness. If we don't forget, we have not really forgiven. The slate has not been wiped clean. We still hold the offense against the other person. The other person is still indebted to us. When we hold onto the hurt as a weapon against the person, we continue to poison our soul.

In order to keep hate, anger, or resentment alive over an extended period of time, we need to not only retain but also treasure the memory of the hurt, the memory of the offense. We may have every right to be offended. What the other person did to us may have been insensitive, wrong, hurtful, or terrible. However, we can decide to keep it alive or not. In order to cling to the feeling or emotion of hate, including its variants, we need to repeat the story again and again to ourselves. There is no other way to keep the resentment alive. If we lose the story, we cannot retain or reproduce the feeling.

When we truly forgive, the memory loses what psychoanalysts would call its cathexis, the energy that keeps it alive within our unconscious. The memory then simply fades away. We don't exactly erase the memory; it sort of erases itself over time.

So we have a choice. We can decide to keep the story going, to keep the memory alive, and hence to fuel our hatred. Or we can let it go. When we do, we will experience the liberating experience of forgiveness. We will find ourselves in the kingdom of heaven and in a loving relationship with those around us.

Think of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Each side has its own version of history. Each side can recount the atrocities that were committed by the other

side. Most of the stories are true. Families on both sides have lost loved ones. They not only remember, they try very hard to remember. They make sure that the next generation will remember all the terrible things that have ever happened to their people.

If we keep the stories alive, how can we ever find peace? When we cling to our history as an integral part of our identity, how can we recognize the legitimacy of the other person's point of view? How can we live in peace with someone we hate?

I think that both the Jews and the Palestinians need to let go of their history. If they do this, they might rediscover each other as human beings. They might discover that they have more in common than they realize. If they were able to forget what happened and why they hate each other, they might discover that they are all children of God and that they can work together to establish the kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus tells us that we must love our enemies, not only for their benefit but also for ours. Unless we do this, we cannot experience the kingdom of God within us and we cannot create the kingdom of God on earth. Thomas Aquinas tells us that the process of loving our enemy starts with forgiveness. Forgiveness is the antidote to the poison of hatred, to the poison of anger and resentment. Forgiveness is at least under our control. We can let go of our anger by letting go of our stories, by not keeping them alive, by not enshrining them in our hearts.

Jesus tells us that if we cannot do this, we have no right to ask or expect God to forgive us. He tells us that the measure we give will be the measure we get. He tells us to pray that God will forgive us our trespasses *to the extent* that we forgive others their trespasses. He then tells us to think about the implications of this very profound prayer. He tells us that our souls will remain poisoned, that we will remain in prison, until we forgive our brother or sister "from our heart." In other words, until we *really* forgive.

"Lord, forgive us our debts *as we* forgive our debtors."

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
March 18, 2012*