

"LOVING AS GOD LOVES"

October 6, 1991

TEXT: Matthew 18:21-22 "Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.'"

I do not know about you, but I have mixed feelings when I think of that parable. I like the part about the king who forgives his servant when asked for mercy. After all, I need that. Who of us does not? Who has never fallen short of God's will for us? Even Paul once wrote, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. (Romans 7:18-19) Like the servant in that parable, we, too, need to be forgiven, and our debt is very great.

So it is comforting to hear that God is merciful. But that is only part of the story, and the easy part, too. From there, Jesus goes on to say that unless we forgive others, we can not be forgiven. "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:35) Where is the "Good News" in that?

Well, there are different kinds of good news. We may learn, for example, that we need extensive surgery. That is good news of a sort, certainly much better than being told that nothing can be done for us. But it is not easy. It means pre-surgical anxieties, post-operative discomfort, and, perhaps, long weeks of recuperation.

Or we may be told we can get our financial house in order, but only after months, perhaps even years, of doing without things we have come to consider essential to the good life. That is good news, too, but, like surgery, not easy. Most of us would much rather regain our physical or financial health without going through anything so uncomfortable or time consuming.

But most of us are also like Peter. Though forgiven much, ourselves, we want to limit what we forgive others. "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Make no mistake, Peter's limits were generous. The rabbis taught people to forgive as many as three times but no more. And Peter more than doubled that. But his limits were still limits.

How Jesus must have stunned him when he answered, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." For, in so doing, he did not just expand Peter's limits. He demolished them. He reminded him

--and us-- that we are called to love as God loves. And that love has no limits. It does not ask how little it must do, but how much it can do.

And nothing less than God's forgiving love will do. Nothing less will do because nothing less can heal this hurting world. Day by day, we are becoming more like Marshall McLuhan's "global village." What happens in Iraq, or Northern Ireland affects us here in Wauwatosa. Modern technology and weapons make human anger far more deadly than ever been before. If we want to live at all, we must learn to forgive.

On this World Communion Sunday, we need to remember Jesus' words, "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go: first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." And we must turn it around as well. If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that you have something against your brother, first be reconciled to your brother. It may not be easy --and might not happen quickly-- but we must do it just the same.

And nothing less than God's forgiving love will do if we want healthy happy lives. Years ago, Dr. John Schindler, pointed out that anger constitutes a major danger to our health. He showed that ulcers, strokes, heart attacks --perhaps even cancer-- can result from unresolved anger.

And why not? If God created us for love, is it so hard to believe that chronic lovelessness might take its toll on our bodies as well as souls. James Forbes, Jr. writes: "There is a certain kind of bitterness, heaviness, unhappiness, tenseness, close-mindedness and spiritlessness which are almost always telltale marks of the infection of unforgiveness." Then he adds, "In marked contrast, forgiveness tends toward being free and clean inside. It lightens the load of life and brightens the human horizon. It enables one to risk singing and dancing and laughing and being free and friendly and helpful."

If we want to survive, we must learn to forgive. God requires it, the world needs it, and we may destroy our own bodies without it. But it is still not an easy thing to do. Even when we want to forgive, we may not know how. Those old angry feelings may keep rising up within us each time we think about the person, or persons, who hurt us.

But the "Good News" is that God can make it possible for us to do the thing we can not do by ourselves. In the book of Galatians we read that enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, dissension, and party spirits are "works of the flesh." That is, these are the things we human beings are prone to when left to our own devices. But Paul promises that we can have love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and much much more as the fruit --or gifts-- of the Spirit.

We may not be able to forgive through our own efforts, but God, by His presence in our lives, can make it possible for us. He who made us can remake us so we can love as He loves. As we come to the table of communion this morning, let us be open to the Spirit that was in Christ. Let us invite God to recreate us in the likeness of His own Son, who, even from the cross, was able to pray, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

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