

Forgiving Others, Freeing Ourselves

[Text - Matthew 18:21-35]

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This morning's New Testament reading begins with what is probably more than a hypothetical question. Simon Peter says to Jesus, "Teacher, if another member of the community sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as *seven* times?" Now maybe Peter just wants a theoretical answer, but I highly doubt it.

You may recall, that Peter is an intensely emotional and fiery fellow. He *swears* that he will never desert Jesus; and to prove it, he cuts-off the ear of the High Priest's servant in the Garden of Gethsemane! But then, within the hour, Peter again swears - three times - that he's never even met Jesus. And then, when he realizes what he's done, Peter weeps bitterly. Simon Peter definitely displays a wide range of emotional intensity, which is why it's not hard to imagine that one of the other disciples has pushed Peter's buttons. But Peter, following his new mantra, W.W.J.D. - What *Wouldn't* Jesus Do - refrains from punching-out that other person. Jesus has good reason for calling Peter "Rocky"!

But Peter is trying. He is willing to go beyond the Mosaic Law of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." He's even willing to expand the prescribed teaching of First Century Rabbis, which is to forgive a person three times. Peter *doubles* that, and adds one more for good measure! He is willing to forgive someone up to *seven times*! Which he thinks should earn him a special commendation from Jesus. [Maybe a *Noel* Peace Prize!] But that doesn't happen. Instead, Jesus says to him, "Don't forgive *seven* times...but seventy times seven."

Wow! O.K....seven times seven is forty-nine, times ten, is four-hundred ninety....so this means that at four-hundred ninety-one, I can go completely ballistic! [Nope, that's not it at all.] What Jesus is saying to Peter, and to you and me, is that forgiveness isn't a matter of counting and calculating; it's a matter of committed and continuous

compassion. Math, we can do in our heads; but forgiveness we must do in our hearts. Besides, if we've really forgiven someone, then we won't be keeping track of the number of wrongs that person does. Genuine forgiveness requires a willingness to *let it go*.

Now, obviously, this isn't easy. We often re-play and re-live those wrongs done against us, over and over and over again in our minds. So maybe it's helpful to look at Jesus' words to Peter from this perspective: maybe it's not a matter of someone "sinning against us" 490 times [that's a lot of sinning!] Maybe, it's just *one* sin - one wrong - that someone's done to us, which we need to *continually* forgive - again and again and again - until we get it right. Until we can finally put that incident behind us, and be set-free to move forward with our lives - no longer giving that person free rental space in our brain, or giving that past incident the power to do us further harm. Forgiveness is something that we all need - to receive it, and to give it. For the most part, we are extremely grateful when it's offered to us. So in return, you and I should also be willing to offer forgiveness to others. How different Jesus' parable would have been, if that first man - who was forgiven so much - had allowed that grace-filled experience to shape his own encounter with that other person who owed him so little. Sadly, he immediately forgets the tremendous compassion shown to him; and instead, he responds with calculated coldness and horrible hardness of heart. Of course, this is just a story.

For Jesus, simply talking about forgiveness isn't enough. He knows the tremendous importance of putting that concept into practice. And when it comes to doing the hard work of forgiveness, Jesus Christ gives us the perfect example. He forgives his closest friends, who desert and betray him; which isn't an easy thing to do. Often the deepest pain and heartbreak we experience is caused by those closest to us - those we love and trust the most - who hurt or harm us. Yet Jesus shows us how to forgive even them. And he also shows us how to forgive our enemies - by forgiving those whose fear and hostility toward him lead them to take his life.

I believe that the reason Jesus could forgive, even in the face of extreme betrayal and unjust suffering, is because he had routinely practiced forgiveness whenever and wherever the opportunity arose. So maybe that's how you and I can approach forgiveness today:
To start with the little things - each and every day - before they can take root and grow, spread and fester;
To remember those times when we ourselves have been forgiven - and to recall how freeing that experience felt;
To remember that we are all forgiven and cherished children of our One Divine Source;
And most of all, to *continually* forgive - again and again and again - until we get it right!