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[Matthew 18:21-35]

"You must forgive them seventy times seven..."

K Karpen, Sunday, September 11, 2005
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
Sacrament of Baptism

[Matthew 18:21-35, "489," K Karpen, September 11, 2005]

"Lord if someone sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus says to Peter, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." Mt. 18:21

Today we have to talk about forgiveness. How strange, that in its random wisdom the revised common lectionary hands us this text about forgiveness on September 11th, that day which has come to symbolize, among many other things, the limits of forgiveness. This morning I listened to the radio as people who had lost brothers and sisters on 9/11 read the names of the people they had lost and other names that just happened to fall alphabetically nearby.

Four years is a long time. A lot has happened in the last four years. A lot of us are different people than we were four years ago. Some of us are living in a different place. Or we have a different job. Or we go to a different school than we did 4 years ago.

Four years is a long time. Our country is a different country than it was four years ago. A lot of things have changed. Heck, our country is a different place than it was four weeks ago, and what will things be like four weeks from now?

Four years is a long time. But it was clear listening to the voices trying to read the names of brothers and sisters that four years is no time at all. I listened as long as I could. As long as I could stand it. As long as I could spare the time. I had stuff to do. We all have stuff to do.

I listened for 15 or 20 minutes. You can read a lot of names in 20 minutes. It must have been a few hundred. But when I finally turned off the radio to finish this sermon, the sisters & brothers reading the list were only up to the B's. And I thought, what would Jesus want to tell those brothers and those sisters about forgiveness? How many times? How many times for them?

There are a few problems with today's text, beyond the obvious one that forgiveness is a lot easier to talk about than do. For one thing, it's hard to know from the original text whether Jesus means to say seventy-seven times or seven times seven. There are problems with either interpretation, and maybe it doesn't matter. Because either way, Jesus is talking about a big number. Maybe impossibly big.

When it comes to forgiveness, our problem isn't getting to seven times or seventy-seven times or seven times seven. Our challenge so often is getting to one.

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Forgiveness is a hard thing. And Jesus just tells us to do it; he's telling us how to do it. Because maybe if we could get to one... Maybe if we could have one good, solid experience of true, deep, difficult forgiveness, with integrity, with change, with reconciliation, the rest would come easy, be it seven times, seventy-seven or four-hundred-ninety.

And yet, I suspect, even so, there may always remain for each of us one thing. One situation, one person we find impossible to forgive. Maybe if we can get to one, we can get to seventy-six. Maybe we can even get to 489. Maybe we'd even forget to count. And still there would remain that 490th time, that seven times seventieth time that is just too much, too difficult for real forgiveness.

What makes forgiveness hard? I want to keep this simple without being glib.

1. Obviously it is difficult to forgive someone who does not understand or acknowledge that she or he has done anything wrong. Someone once came up to me and said, "K, I just want you to know I forgive you." And I said, "What???" I, like most people come with a built-in self-preservation filter that converts and rationalizes everything I do. Sorry, we're rarely going to see things from your perspective in the way we'd need to to ask for your forgiveness.
2. Related to that first problem... Conflict or offense is rarely one-sided. How often do I sit around waiting for a person to come ask me for forgiveness, failing to see the part I played in that offense or conflict.
3. There are a lot of things that make it hard to forgive. But one more big one is that we get attached to our grudges. They give us meaning! They help us define ourselves! They help us excuse ourselves!

And against all that, Jesus can only offer the simple fact played out in the parable he tells, that failing to forgive costs you more than it costs the one you can't forgive. These people don't go away: your brother, your sister, your parents, your ex-husband, your ex-wife, your ex-girlfriend, your ex-boss, your ex-pastor. They can be as ex- as you want. You can never see them again, and guess what?! They'll still be right there with you in your waking hours or in the middle of the night.

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Jesus begs you to forgive not because he cares so very much for all those ex-people in your life, though maybe he does. Jesus begs us to forgive because he cares about you. Your life. Your capacity for love and wholeness. That's why. He doesn't want you to be good. He wants you to be well—to deal with it.

One last word about forgiveness. You can do it by yourself. Reconciliation, the repair of a relationship, that takes two, and that takes time. Forgiveness is a little different. It can happen at home. It can happen right here. It can happen in your heart. All you need to do is let go. All you need to do is let go.

So that's fine for the 489 times, but what about the seven times seventieth? What about that thing we just can't forgive? My friends, that is why we have a forgiving God, to forgive our inability to forgive... That's why we need a forgiving God.