

### *How Many Times Must I Forgive?*

‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’

Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’

**Matthew 18:15-22**

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Every year during Williams College’s spring break my chaplain colleagues and I take a group of students to Alabama for a week-long experience of faith-based service. We work with Habitat for Humanity to rebuild houses in Tuscaloosa that were destroyed in one of the biggest tornadoes ever recorded, back in 2011. For the trip we try to pull together the most religiously diverse group of students we can – because the other thing we do, after swinging hammers and laying tile and buzzing saws all day, is while away half the night talking about life and faith and hope and God and truth.

I’ll never forget the moment, one evening on our first year’s trip, when I knew we were really on to something. That night we happened to be talking about forgiveness, sprawled all over the youth group room in the church where we stay, and I watched one of the students slowly nod off with the conversation still swirling around him. I could hardly blame him: it had been another LONG day on the building site, and we’d just polished off a big pot of chili or something that we cooked ourselves for supper. We were talking about whether forgiving entails or requires forgetting. The diversity of our student body is such that, in most years, we can draw on most of the world’s religious traditions right there in the room – so there’s plenty to say, from a lot of different perspectives. After a while the snoozing student woke up again, listened thoughtfully for a few minutes – and then made a very vulnerable and beautiful comment about his own struggles with letting go of the memory of some relational wound he’d suffered over the course of his young life. Then he listened some more – and closed his eyes – and, before long, was dozing again on the overstuffed couch, with Interfaith Dialogue for a pillow and the affection of his classmates and his chaplains for a blanket.

It was like life itself, I suppose: we wake as though from a deep sleep to take part for a brief while in a conversation pondering the deepest mysteries of the life we find ourselves in the middle of – a conversation that was already going on before we stumbled awake, and that will continue even as we doze – a conversation that somehow both enlivens us and comforts us, even though it's never, never finished.

For those late-night theological conversations my chaplain-buddies and I have evolved a sort of curriculum that pivots around one big question: “what is a human being?” Each night one of us launches the conversation with a piece of our own particular sacred text and a leading question. Cantor Bob, our Jewish Chaplain, for instance, might begin by wondering about what the book of Genesis means when it says that we're made in the image and likeness of God; or Sharif, our Muslim Chaplain, might ask if people are surprised to hear that the Qur'an insists that human diversity (including religious diversity) is, not an accident, but an essential and intentional part of Allah's design for the world. When it comes to me (the dour Protestant), I have tended to bring a piece of the New Testament that doesn't mince words about how difficult we human beings make things for each other – words that set up my leading question, which is, “what's wrong with human beings – and what can be done about it?”

I guess that's a question that I woke up to – a question that's at the heart of the continuing, unfinished conversation of my own faith. I guess it's a question that we're all waking up to, these days – or that's waking us up. So – because it's in the nature of summer in Rensselaerville that we end up talking about the things we're all pondering in a continuing way – it's the question I bring you this morning. *What's wrong with human beings – and what can be done about it?*

What is a human being? Part of the answer, surely, is that human beings are the ones who, over and over again, run roughshod over one another's dignity, integrity, identity. And, even more, human beings are the ones who keep score of those collisions, and so often find ourselves locked in cycles of retaliation for wounds inflicted and injustices suffered. And surely part of the unique contribution that Christianity makes to the great unfinished human conversation is the notion of the unearned, unmerited favor of God that can intervene in that destructive cycle and restore us to rightness and wholeness in spite of ourselves. Our Protestant forebears were particularly convinced of the gravity of human sin, on the one hand, and the extravagance of divine grace, on the other. As a species we carry a more or less constant need for forgiveness for our individual habits of selfishness and our communal habits of injustice. Faith, for us, has meant living in the conviction that one of the true things about us is our propensity to brokenness in our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with God – but that the *truest* thing about us is the grace of God that makes the wounded whole over and over again, and intervenes in our scorekeeping with a paradigm that holds justice and mercy radically together – indeed, a paradigm that insists that justice and mercy are not two different things, but part of the same thing.

The passage from the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew is so honest about what tends to go wrong among us human beings. New Testament scholar Charles Cousar reminds us that “Matthew's story was written initially for a small community living in a hostile environment that took its

[communal] life very seriously.”<sup>1</sup> They lived, evidently, in a very transparent and intimate community, surrounded by adversaries, in which it mattered enormously how they chose to live their way forward in the footsteps of Jesus. Many think that the community for which John wrote the fourth gospel was similar – and, in that gospel, the very first words of the risen Jesus to his gathered disciples were, “Peace be with you... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:23). Evidently forgiveness was one part of the conversation into which the very first Christians found themselves awakening – and it hasn’t left us alone since.

The remarkable Rev. Nancy Taylor, pastor of Boston’s Old South Church, says that worship, each Sunday, is meant to be “a rehearsal for heaven,” a chance for us to practice what it will be like when amazing grace holds sway at last, with all our wrongs put right and the wounds we’ve inflicted and suffered are healed, and the score not only settled but long forgotten. That would almost be enough to make it easy to get up early on a Sunday morning and come to church: a taste of heaven waiting at an outpost of the Kingdom right in your neighborhood! But then, we have Matthew to help us remember that this is the church we’re talking about – where people have been known to run roughshod over one another’s dignity, integrity and identity as they do in pretty much any other institution human beings have ever devised. In our own spiritual family, the Presbyterian General Assembly in Portland, Oregon earlier this summer debated a resolution of apology for wrongs done and hurt inflicted upon the church’s lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members over generations of harsh theological and ethical judgment in church and society. But we weren’t ready to stop keeping score. The General Assembly ended up amending the language of the resolution so that, instead of taking responsibility and offering an apology, the church expresses “[deep] regret that, due to human failings, any person might find cause to doubt being loved by God.” So the Assembly ended in a swirl of unfinished conversation about whether saying “I’m sorry you felt that way” is or is not equivalent to saying “I’m sorry that I said and did things that caused you harm.” Some felt that the church was asking, not for forgiveness, but for forgetfulness.

“Then Peter came and said to [Jesus], ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’”

“Unforgiveable” is a word we’ve been hearing often, lately, in the heated public discourse of these anguished times of ours. As we watch rooms-full of innocent people mowed down by assault weapons, as we listen to demagogues impugn the dignity and insult the intelligence of huge swaths of the body politic, as we contemplate the urgent crises which our comforts and conveniences provoke for the delicate ecosystems of the planet’s climate or the human family’s diversities, the overheated language of our time makes it seem easier to declare something, or someone, “beyond the pale,” unforgiveable. Even Matthew’s careful code of ethics seems to allow for the possibility that, if you’ve made three attempts to be reconciled with your estranged neighbor – by yourself, with a companion, and with the community – and it’s still to no avail, you can be excused for letting matters lie there: “if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.” Yet, lest we think that this

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<sup>1</sup> Preaching through the Christian Year, p. 476.

gives us clearance to evict one another from membership in the human race, it's worth remembering that Jesus made a particular point of eating with tax collectors, and that with a lot of help from Saint Paul the early church's first project was learning to embrace Gentiles. It may be that our efforts for restored relationship may hit an impasse; but can they ever really afford to cease altogether? Any more than prayer can ever really afford to cease?

This spring a group of Williams students who are some of my personal spiritual heroes and sheroes – a group that calls itself InterFaith, and in fact includes many alumni of the Tuscaloosa spring break trips of several years – put on a conference for their peers from schools all over New England – and they chose for the conference theme, “Forgiving the Unforgiveable.” They sensed, I think, that our ability to survive as a human family depends now, more than ever, on an unblinking and courageous wrestling with that most demanding of all spiritual disciplines – the practice of forgiveness. They invited no less an authority on the subject than the great Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, to speak – Gene Robinson, who has endured death threats, and watched a whole wing of his beloved church secede to become, in effect, their own denomination just to get away from having to be in the same church with him. Gene Robinson directed our attention to a passage, elsewhere in Matthew's gospel (12:31-32), where Jesus says one remarkable and puzzling thing to say about what, if anything, is unforgiveable: “Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” Gene Robinson reminded us that these words describe divine forgiveness. They surely leave us wondering what would constitute “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” in the eyes of God – but, in the meantime, they don't waive the challenge of Jesus to forgive one another “seventy times seven.”

So we can contemplate the broken heart of God in the events of our time that pillage or denigrate or desecrate the vibrant and sacred life that we associate with the Holy Spirit. And still we awaken to the persistent, unfinished conversation – what is a human being? And still we recognize that our faith – and indeed, our humanity – sets before us no more rigorous spiritual discipline than to discover, time and again, how to find it in ourselves to forgive, seven times and seventy times seven. Still it falls to us, over and again, to seek a way to live, always, as though something new were possible between us. Over and over again we awaken from our slumber to the discovery that, somehow, and God and the Holy Spirit help us, it falls to us to speak to one another honestly and courageously about the hurts we have suffered at one another's hands – and to ask one another's humanizing forgiveness. And still, most of all, it is ours to remember that the model of our humanity is one who, with his last breath, forgave the ones who caused him the greatest pain, because he knew, above all, that God's own arms would never refuse a broken and contrite heart.

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### **Call to Worship**

Here in this familiar place, we seek a presence that is new and fresh, to startle us to life, abundantly and gratefully.

Here, in the midst of the sameness of our lives, we ask for the courage to let go of all that holds us back from living in God's new creation.

Here, in the embrace of this community of welcome, we treasure God's promise never to turn away any who seek God's company along their way.

Here, on the leading edge of the future, we hope for a word to sustain us, a breath to inspire us, a purpose to summon us, a community to hold us.

O God – be with us today, we pray – for we long to be with You. Amen.

### **Prayer of Confession**

Loving God – In the life of Jesus You have endeavored to teach us to trust in the power of forgiveness to make all things new. So we bring before You this morning those things which have wounded our trust or caged our hope: memories of our failures, and the failures of others ... scars of unresolved anger and unhealed hurt ... fear of being vulnerable ... doubt and despair that living without these burdens will ever be possible. These are not the most beautiful gifts we have to offer You; but we know that until we lay them in the waiting arms of Jesus, until we allow You into the crowded spaces they have claimed in our hearts and minds, we will never fully grasp the full scope of the love with which You would fill us. So forgive us, gentle and generous God: take the burdens we each carry alone and the burdens that we all carry together, and transform them into the love that will make us new. Fill us with the love that marks us as Your children, and followers of Your Son, our brother and our Lord, Jesus Christ – in whose name we ask it. Amen.

### **Assurance of Pardon**

These are the words Jesus spoke to those he met who were burdened, encumbered, wounded, dis-spirited:

Arise, take up your pallet and walk.

Your faith has made you well.

All things are possible for those who believe.

I do not condemn you. Go and sin no more.

It has often seemed to me that some part of the power of his words of healing comes as it meets a will for wholeness that wells up from deep within us. Jesus unbinds us from the power of the memories, the wounds, the failures that constrain us. Jesus reaches to us just as we reach to him. Let us feel trust rising within us even as the power of God's forgiving love reaches toward us: in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.