

"Forgive Us"

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, bless us with your love and forgiveness. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

Late one summer evening, a weary truck driver pulled his big rig into an all-night truck stop. The waitress had just served him when three tough looking, Hell's Angels bikers decided to give him a hard time. They verbally abused him; one grabbed the hamburger off his plate; another took a handful of his fries; and the third picked up his coffee and began to drink it.

The truck driver calmly rose, picked up the check, walked to the front of the diner, put the check and his money beside the cash register, and went out the door. The waitress put the money in the till and stood watching out the door as the big truck drove away into the night.

When she returned, one of the bikers said to her, "Well, he's not much of a man, is he?" She replied, "I don't know about that, but he sure ain't much of a truck driver. He just ran over three motorcycles on his way out of the parking lot."

Conflicts can escalate out of control. The truck driver didn't forgive the bikers, he got more than even, and now, he may face even greater vengeance.

Our gospel reading this morning follows right after our reading from last week, where Jesus describes a dispute resolution process that begins, "If another member of the church sins against you..." Today we continue the discussion about resolving conflict in the church, with Peter asking Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" Peter suggests forgiving seven times, which seems generous, especially as there's no mention of repentance by the other party.

Peter is using as a guide, the pronouncement of God's vengeance from Genesis, when God tells Adam and Eve's eldest son, Cain the repercussions of killing his younger brother Abel. God puts a mark on Cain so that "Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." Cain leaves alone for the land of Nod and

later in the same chapter, Lamech, a descendant of Cain, laments killing a man who struck him. Lamech says, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." Continuing the reference to forgiveness instead of vengeance, Jesus responds to Peter that Peter should forgive a sinner in the church, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Jesus then tells the parable of the unforgiving servant which is a kind of negative allegory also, with the message: don't be like the unforgiving servant! The king represents God, the servants represent the church, the unforgiving servant represents a sinner in the church, and the debt represents sin. But it gets a bit difficult, because it seems that the king is a bit of a tyrant in the end, for after forgiving the servant, the king angrily hands him over to be tortured until he pays his entire debt. We would have expected the negative allegory to preserve God's infinite love and forgiveness that Jesus has taught us elsewhere.

Forgiveness is easy to talk about, but can be very difficult in practice. And the greater the forgiveness that is necessary, the more difficult it is. Unimaginable hurt requires unimaginable forgiveness.

I mentioned Corrie ten Boom last week. Corrie ten Boom and her family were Christians who were active in social work in their home town of Haarlem, the Netherlands. During the Nazi occupation, they chose to act out their faith through peaceful resistance to the Nazis by participating in the Dutch underground. They hid, fed, and transported out of the country, Jewish people and underground members hunted by the Gestapo. They saved the lives of hundreds of Jewish people and they protected many underground resistance workers.

On February 28, 1944, Corrie and her family were betrayed and arrested. Corrie was sent to the infamous Ravensbruck concentration camp for women and children along with her sister, Betsie, who died there. Corrie often reflected on the horrors of the Ravensbruck concentration camp and she wrote of her experiences in her book, "The Hiding Place." How could she ever forgive the former Nazis who had been her jailers? Where were love and forgiveness in a horror camp where thousands of women and children died of starvation or sickness, died from human medical experiments, were shot, or were sent to the gas chamber? How could she

ever forget the horrible cruelty of the guards and the smoke constantly spewing from the chimney of the crematorium?

At the very heart of the church that was being formed by Jesus and his followers is love and forgiveness. It's an ongoing activity to maintain the harmonious work of the church in the world. It's not about accepting abuse and forgiving blindly, but a communal process that brings together forgiveness and repentance for true reconciliation. To make this point, Jesus uses a wildly exaggerated negative allegory in his parable of the unforgiving servant.

The unforgiving servant owes the king 10,000 talents. A talent was the largest monetary unit, representing 45 pounds of silver. One talent is equal to 6,000 drachmas, which is about 15 years of wages for a labourer. So, debt of 10,000 talents is about 150,000 years of wages; about 3,000 lifetimes; it's enormous; it's impossible. The annual tax income for all of Herod the Great's territories was about 900 talents per year. The servant's situation is unimaginably hopeless and there is no possible way that his debt can ever be repaid. And there's no way that a human king would simply forgive such an enormous debt.

The fellow servant's debt is microscopic in comparison, thus making an almost infinite contrast. A hundred denarii are about 100 day's wages; sizeable, but realistic. In the first situation, the servant pleaded for mercy to forgive an infinite debt, a debt that could never actually be repaid, and his request was granted by the king. In the second situation, having been forgiven, the unforgiving servant would not forgive the realistic debts of his fellow servant. The other servants are greatly distressed. The allegory is that God forgives our infinite human sin, but in turn, the sinner does not forgive the ordinary sin of his fellow servant in the church. The message: don't be like the unforgiving servant!

It's an interesting twist in the allegory at the end, when the king seems to rescind his infinite mercy. There are many interpretations, but it seems that if we don't forgive others, we don't benefit from our own forgiveness. The unforgiving servant is condemned to eternal torment, not because of God's wrath, but because he brings it upon himself by not forgiving his fellow servant. The benefit of our own forgiveness is realized through our forgiveness of others. It's in forgiving that we

are forgiven. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." There's an important reciprocity in forgiveness.

After her release, Corrie ten Boom frequently preached about Christian forgiveness and she recalls, "It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, a former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face." As the church was emptying, the man came up to Corrie and commented on her message to the congregation, "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein," he said, "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!" His hand was thrust out to shake Corrie's, and Corrie, who had preached so often about the need to forgive, kept her hand at her side. Angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through her and she saw the sin of them. Corrie reasoned that Jesus Christ had died for this man; was she going to ask for more? "Lord Jesus," she prayed, "forgive me and help me to forgive him." She tried to smile, and struggled to raise her hand. But she could not. She says that she felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again she breathed a silent prayer, "Jesus," she prayed, "I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness."

Then, as she took his hand, the most incredible thing happened. Corrie describes, "From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me." "I forgive you, brother, with all my heart," she said. Later, Corrie testified that "it was the power of the Holy Spirit" who had poured the love of God into her heart that day. This is the only way true forgiveness can take place. We turn our hurt over to God. We ask God for the ability to forgive. Corrie said that "to forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you."

Let us pray. **Dear God, forgive us, and by your grace, through the power of the Holy Spirit, allow us to forgive others and experience the grace with which we ourselves are forgiven. Amen.**