

Lectionary 24A, 2017, Matthew 18:21-35, September 17, 2017. Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

Is forgiveness natural? I mean, if it weren't for the words of Jesus, and other similar commands to forgive others we hear in the Bible, would we, on our own, forgive those who hurt us? Certain people think that forgiveness is totally unnatural to human beings. William Willomon, a favorite author of mine, writes: "the human animal is not supposed to be good at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence; these are natural human qualities. It is natural for the human animal to defend itself, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is not natural. It is not a universal human virtue."

Do you agree with William Willomon? Maybe you do, but aren't quite comfortable with his pessimistic view about the natural state of what it means to be human. After all, he makes us sound more like animals than he does human beings. Certainly we don't find forgiveness as a quality within the animal kingdom. And in so far as human beings share animal-like qualities then maybe he is right. Forgiveness is alien to a natural human state.

Maybe you would like the more optimistic approach of recent medical research. Reports published in medical journals show that people who are able to forgive live longer than others who don't. It used to be thought that Type A personalities lived shorter lives than others. Type A people being those who are always on the go, who constantly need to be in motion, who expend lots of energy. But more recent research indicates that it's not personality type which is important for long life, but how well one deals with anger. Those who bottle up anger, who can't or won't forgive others, but allow resentments to build up are at greater risk for heart problems, or stroke, or other life-threatening diseases.

This research indicates that forgiveness is more a learned behavior. Forgiveness turns out to be a sophisticated form of self-preservation. An example of the way human beings adapt to social situations. This research suggests it may be more costly to human life to snarl, howl and bite back, as Willomon says, and more advantageous to forgive, in order to maintain peace, and maintain health.

Even if you accept this theory, that forgiveness promotes health, it still begs the question, are there limits to forgiveness we are capable of? After all, we are still human, aren't we? This is precisely the question that's behind the question Peter asks Jesus in our gospel reading this morning. How often should I forgive another member of the church who sins against me? What are the limits, Lord, to my forgiveness?

Peter offers an entirely reasonable, and even generous answer. As many as seven times? Peter's suggestion is full of symbolism. Seven is regarded as perfect number. According to the Bible God created the heavens and earth in seven days, so the number seven stands for everything perfect and Godly and complete. Peter believes he is offering the most expansive, the most God-like response. Forgiving someone seven times is positively divine. You can almost picture Peter offering his suggestion and waiting with a smug look on his face, waiting for Jesus' praise for how clever and magnanimous he is.

Jesus answer blows Peter's self-righteousness out of the water. It must have been so shocking that the scribes who remembered Jesus' response couldn't agree on the number. IN some versions it's seven times seven, or seventy seven times like the one today, or in others seventy times seven. The point is still the same. Forgiveness is not about keeping score, and checking it off your to-do list and feeling satisfied when you've completed the task.

It sounds ridiculous. And it is. To further drive home his point Jesus tells a parable about a king calling in the debts owed to him by his servants. One servant owed the king ten thousands talents. It sounds big, but you have no idea how big this debt really was. A single talent is about the equivalent of fifteen years' worth of wages. So if the slave were required to work off his debt, it would take him more than one hundred and fifty thousand years! No wonder he fell on his knees and begged forgiveness! But then, after having received such a wonderful and generous forgiveness of his debts, he refused to forgive someone who owes him a hundred denarii, a significant debt, but still only worth about a hundred days of work. This act of refusing a miniscule amount of forgiveness in light of the overwhelming act of generosity enrages the king. The unforgiving servant is thrown into a debtor's prison where is expected to work off his debt, which of course is impossible.

The point is clear. Forgiveness doesn't begin in a notion of whether or not is good for us, or if it helps us to get along better with others, or if it reduces the risk of heart attack or stroke. Forgiveness begins with God. Forgiveness begins with a generous king forgiving the overwhelming and incalculable debt owed by a servant. The sheer magnitude of this graceful act of forgiveness makes us stop in our tracks and simply marvel at how God's generosity is unlike anything we could possibly create on our own.

I know the parable Jesus tells turns to the servant's response which finally ends up in a command to forgive our brothers and sisters from the heart. And that's the part we zero in on. I know plenty of people who have, or had, real brothers and sisters whom they either could not or would not forgive. I've also encountered over the years who hold on to grudges over a hurt or insult inflicted a long time ago. You probably can think of times or people in your own life who have been hard, or even impossible, to forgive. So the command to forgive seems impossible, even when we realize we're the servant forgiven of a gigantic, enormous debt and who, in turn, should forgive the relatively puny debt.

And here's where we can get hopelessly stuck. We blip over the generosity of God and focus instead on ourselves. We hear what Jesus Christ has experienced on our behalf, crucifixion death and resurrection, and rather than see how that event changes everything for us, we turn right back to ourselves and hold on to the ways we have been slighted or injured. And I don't want to minimize hurt, because sometimes hurt is born out of very real, and even evil, abuse or crime. Forgiveness is not always easy. Forgiveness can seem impossible.

But I believe what Jesus tells us in this parable is something even more radical and graceful. Forgiveness always, always, begins in God. Jesus' life of reconciling love is now your destiny and my destiny, and even the world's destiny. The trajectory of our lives is always towards forgiveness, because Jesus lives beyond death. The prayer Jesus prayed on the cross, "Father forgive them," is fully and finally answered when Jesus rises from the grave. You and I are raised to a life that will have, and even now have, forgiving hearts.

So, what are the possibilities in your life, hearing that your destiny is always towards forgiveness? What might you be able to say and do that otherwise might have seemed hard or even impossible? Remember, Jesus lives, and everything in the world is moving towards the reconciliation he now fulfills. Nothing is impossible. All is possible. Amen.