

We continue reading today from the gospel of Matthew. We have been following along with the lectionary, the Scriptures assigned to each Sunday, as they have been guiding us through the gospel of Matthew. Today we come to a text from the 18th chapter.

Last week we read from the words which immediately precede this text. Words about conflict in the local church and how one must go directly to the one who has offended. We heard about how those words were written as a way to protect the victim and as a way to move toward peace and reconciliation within a congregation in conflict with one another.

Today we pick up on a continuation of that theme. Today the disciples are wondering how often they need to forgive one another. They want limits but they will discover that when it comes to Jesus he sees no limits to how many times one is to forgive another.

In our opening two verses you will see the number seven. Seven is one of those numbers in the Bible that has symbolic meaning behind it. Seven is a number which represents completeness. Think about the story of Creation. In the Genesis story of Creation the number seven becomes a symbolic number representing completeness.

In this Scripture pay attention to what Jesus does with this symbolic number 7. There is also disagreement on exactly what number Jesus says back to Peter whether it is 77 or 70 x 7. Either way the symbolism of the completeness associated with 7 is central to how Jesus responds.

Read Matthew 18:21-35

Bishop Desmond Tutu begins his book, "The Book of Forgiving" with a story. Rev. Tutu was the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was formed after the end of apartheid in South Africa. The Commission was tasked with the responsibility of identifying the atrocities committed in South Africa and trying to find a way for healing and reconciliation.

Mrs. Mhlawuli shared her story with the commission about what happened to her husband. "He had many wounds. In the upper abdomen there were five wounds. These wounds indicated that different weapons were used to stab him, or a group of people stabbed him."

Mrs. Mhlawuli was speaking about the disappearance and murder of her husband. She continued. "In the lower part he also had wounds. In total there were 43. They poured acid on his face. They chopped off his right hand just below the wrist. I don't know what they did with that hand."

Tutu says a wave of disgust and nausea came over him as he listened to her tell her story. But then her 19 year old daughter spoke. She was 8 years old at the time that her father died. Her brother was only 3.

Her daughter described the grief, the police harassment, and the hardship since her dad's death. And then she shared this. "I would love to know who killed my father. So would my brother. We want to forgive them. We want to forgive. But we do not know who to forgive."

This text from Matthew is a hard text I think to preach. It is a hard text because I think about how many times I have had people tell me how this text has been used to victimize them.

I am referring to the women who have told me or whose stories I have heard who have been in emotionally and physically abusive relationships and their male pastors have told them that they need to forgive their abusive father or abusive husband and remain in their marriage.

I think about the people of color who have been held in captivity and told to forgive their captors. I think about any instance when the ones who benefit from being in power or who benefit from privilege tell the powerless and the victimized to forgive and move on.

Desmond Tutu tells his own story of witnessing abuse in his family. In his words, "There were so many nights when I, as a young boy, had to watch helplessly as my father verbally and physically abused my mother. I can still recall the smell of alcohol, the fear in my mother's eyes, and feel the hopeless despair at seeing people I love hurting each other in incomprehensible ways."

Tutu says that he would not wish that experience on anyone, especially not a child. He reflects and writes, "If I dwell in those memories, I can feel myself wanting to hurt my father back, in the same ways he hurt my mother, and in ways I was incapable as a small boy.

I see my mother who was a gentle human being and who did nothing to deserve the pain inflicted on her. When I recall this story I realize how difficult forgiveness is. The trauma lives on."

The trauma does live on. But many times we do not see how the trauma impacts us. Tutu writes that he realized that his Dad was a broken man acting out of his own brokenness. And that happens to many of us.

Many of us have been traumatized by family members and others from our past and we have been unable to resolve those issues. Since we have this unresolved pain we lash out and transfer our anger on others.

We transfer this pain onto others and live lives where we are driven by revenge rather than forgiveness. We try to hurt others because we are broken rather than offer forgiveness because we have been made whole in Christ.

Being unable to forgive the trauma in our lives leads us to make unconscious decisions which leads us into more trauma.

But Jesus invites us into a new way of life. In the story that Jesus tells a man has an incredible debt forgiven by the king. The debt is so large that it would take a servant 150 years to pay it off. But in this story the king listens to the servant and forgives him of his large financial debt.

But this servant is unable to pass this forgiveness along. When he encounters a servant that owes him money that would amount to about 3 months' pay to work it off he demands his money. The forgiven servant is unable to recognize the grace in his life so that he cannot extend it to another.

I do think it is dangerous to tell someone that they have to forgive another. Like I said, this advice can come from people who are used to being in power and benefiting from privilege. But we can hear this text and be invited by Jesus to live a life of forgiveness. To cast off our burdens and allow grace and forgiveness to be our guide.

We turn now once again to Bishop Tutu who I think is the greatest witness to what forgiveness is really about.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfbX8AercJ4>

Do we want to live a life of revenge or a life of forgiveness? The choice is ours.
AMEN.

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-Tutu, Desmond, *The Book of Forgiving: Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and the World*, <https://www.amazon.com/Book-Forgiving-Fourfold-Healing-Ourselves/dp/0062203568>

-Given: September 17, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)