

Year A, Proper 19

September 17, 2017

Matthew 18:21-35

Double Knowing

If your brother or sister continues to throw stumbling blocks in front of you how many times do you put up with that before you cut them off? Where is the limit? It's the same question Peter asked when he said "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

No one wants to live in an environment where we can be tripped at any moment. Living that way makes us tense and insecure. Communities characterized by frequent "trippings" become risk averse and the quality of community life deteriorates.

How many times do you forgive? "Jesus said, 'Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times.'" His flippant response suggests the number doesn't matter. You don't keep track. You just forgive, and forgive, and forgive.

How many of you find Jesus' answer satisfying? He seems to pull the plug on counting sins committed against us. His answer deprives us the satisfaction of looking forward to cutting repeat offenders off at some point down the road.

Jesus then launches into a long story about the kingdom of heaven. It is a wonderfully Jewish story responding to the raw question hanging in the air.

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he works through his ledger he discovered a huge debt one servant owes him, ten thousand bags of gold, it was.

They bring this servant before the king who tells him that he, his wife, and his children and everything he owns will be sold and the proceeds used as payment on his debt. The servant falls down before him and says "please, be patient with me, I'll pay you back." Any listener to the story knows the amount to be paid back is so large no person or family could do it in one lifetime. The crowd listening to the story think, "Too late buddy; you should have thought of that when you were accruing all that debt. You made your bed and now you sleep in it."

But the master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan. The servant not only doesn't have to pay interest, his debt is cancelled. The master has released him from all obligations. He and his family's future open and they can start again in total

freedom. He has been released from the world of debt and enrolled in the world of plenty. Will he be comfortable in this world?

As the story advances this same servant goes out the door, finds a fellow servant who owes him some small change, grabs him by the throat and says “Pay me back what you owe me!” Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him saying, “Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.” Paying him back is very doable since they’re only talking about cigarette money. But the forgiven servant, the one who has gratuitously been inaugurated into the debt free world of plenty, refuses. He throws his neighbor into prison until he pays back his debt.

What does this have to do with how many times we should forgive someone who throws stumbling blocks that trip us? Well, the story isn’t finished yet.

“When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended.” Whenever we see the word “offended” in this section of Matthew think “stumbling block.” In the original Greek it’s the same word. So the forgiven servant throws a stumbling block in front of his peers by not forgiving his neighbor who owes him much less than he has been forgiven. The one given the opportunity to live in a world outside the boundaries of debt and repayment chooses to reenter that world by insisting his fellow servant pay up right now and in full.

The other servants say, “It’s not fair! Can you believe what he did? He catches a break and the millions he owed got canceled and then he throws his friend in prison for not paying him a dollar and a half. What a jerk!”

They are so offended, “They came and told their master all that happened.” They hadn’t faulted the king for forgiving this servant his huge debt. But when the one forgiven didn’t forgive his neighbor who owed him almost nothing, they fell out of relationship and decided to report him.

“His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servants, just as I had mercy on you?’ His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt.”

It’s a typical ending to a parable in Matthew because it seems to promise eternal punishment along with torture. But we were told at the beginning that this is a story describing the kingdom of heaven—remember “the kingdom of heaven is like”...It’s not a judgment story though on the surface it sounds like it, it’s not about hell and what happens to people who don’t forgive those who cause them to stumble any number of times. How do we make sense of it?

Maybe we can make sense of it if we pay attention to Jesus' application line at the end of the story. According to Matthew Jesus says "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

We have to forgive those who throw stumbling blocks in our path from our heart! How do we do that? He says, it's not a matter of how many times we forgive; seven or seventy-seven, but whether or not our forgiveness comes from the heart. Forgiveness can't come from some law, from some obligation that says we have to forgive. Maybe it can only come from the heart when we have a profound awareness of how much we have been forgiven.

Maybe the key to forgiving is deepening our awareness of how much we have been forgiven. That is the only strategy I can see for getting our heart involved. Maybe the kingdom of heaven is a place where all recognize themselves as those who throw stumbling blocks and yet are forgiven. Abbot Andrew is the Abbot of an Episcopal Monastery in Michigan. The monks live together and worship seven times a day. When they discuss their life together one of their most common refrains is "you do it too." They all do it and yet they are forgiven.

Jesus followers all live in that forgiveness and this forgiveness is in the process of changing our hearts. As our hearts soften, our awareness deepens and our gratitude broadens, we find it easier and easier to forgive our brother and sister from the heart. We know they are just like us. We all have difficulty forgiving and yet we are forgiven. We all do it too.

Knowing we all struggle helps us forgive those who continue to throw stumbling blocks in our direction. Maybe we can even love them while they are still throwing them. We know we have thrown them and still do, though we want to throw them less.

The biggest stumbling block we, as a species, threw was toward Jesus. We blamed him for everything even though he was innocent. He knew what was coming and still took the fall. After he fell he forgave the human species and asked us to forgive each other. He said his reason for coming to live among us in the first place was to show us how this worked. It was an act of love. He wanted to give us an example of loving those who throw stumbling blocks even before they know they throw them, even before they take responsibility for throwing them; even while they are doing it.

We know that we still throw stumbling blocks and yet we are forgiven. That double knowing makes forgiveness from our hearts possible. Thanks be to God. Amen.