

Stanford Memorial Church
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WIDENING THE CIRCLE
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Romans 13.8-14
Matthew 18.15-20

At first glance, our gospel lesson sounds fairly straight-forward. Essentially, Jesus and his disciples appear to be working out the components of a Formula for Forgiveness, as part of the church's operating manual. Presumably, the disciples have expressed concern about how much forgiveness is enough if someone has sinned against them. Such a "sin" might take a variety of forms: from deception, to betrayal, to defamation of character, to physical violence. So they press Jesus on what are the outer limits of forgiveness in such a situation?

"How often must I forgive?" Behind this simple query there is a second, inferred, question: viz., "what is the minimum expenditure . . . how much of my time and resources must I invest . . . just how much must I inconvenience myself to ensure that I am in the "in" group, that I am going to make it through the pearly gates?" Isn't it interesting how much time and energy we often expend on such questions. It is an economy of scarcity approach, while Jesus—as we shall see—operates from an economy of plenty perspective.

At any rate, Jesus appears to take the disciples' question at face value and proceeds to outline a four step approach to forgiveness and reconciliation—an approach that almost any corporation, social or religious group would happily adopt today. Step one, find a time and place alone with the offender and point out his or her fault. Step two--if step one does not work—bring one or two others with you, so you have witnesses, hopefully voices of reason to be of assistance in your effort to extend forgiveness and achieve reconciliation. If you still have not accomplished your goal, institute step three and get the entire church involved in pointing out the fault to the offender. Finally, if all else fails, lower the boom and "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (18.17b). Then Jesus ostensibly sets the final screw by declaring, "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" (18.19) Case closed.

If we let the matter stop at this point, however, we will miss the subtly layered, revolutionary message on the true nature of forgiveness. In effect, this

gospel lesson serves as something of a peephole, and when we look through it we view an infinite landscape of forgiveness. To do so, however, we must take a second look at a couple of key words in the text as well as consider the context in which this passage is place.

The key words are “Gentile” and “tax collector.” The tax collector reference is anything but fortuitous. These officials were among the most despised functionaries of their day; believe it or not, our present day IRS people pale by comparison. In addition to collecting outrageous levies set by the governing officials, they were also empowered to exact any additional sums they could obtain as their personal income. Whether by design or default, it was a system which invariably fermented and rewarded betrayal, exploitation and violence.

The little secret behind this “tax collector” reference is that Matthew, the author of this book, was originally a tax collector who became a disciple of Jesus (Matt. 10.2) and returned the money he had obtained so ruthlessly. Behind the words of Jesus we can hear Matthew whispering, “Yes, and see what forgiveness did for me . . . it totally transformed the meaning and purpose of my life” Imagine what a great irony it would be, however, if Matthew was, in fact, the disciple who originally raised this question of how much must I forgive! Of course we have no way of knowing.

In addition to the tax collector reference there is a second loaded word—Gentile. In New Testament times the word was used by Jews to refer to anyone who was not Jewish, somewhat analogous to the earlier practice of the Greeks to refer to all non Greeks as “barbarians.” What did Jesus mean, to treat someone as a Gentile? Well, the very next story Jesus tells his disciples has to do with a Gentile king who practices forgiveness. It has to do with a servant who is heavily in debt to the king and, when he pleads for mercy, the king totally forgives the indebtedness. In other words, to be as a Gentile is to forgive!

Finally, if ever there was a passage that must be considered in its context, this is the one. The way the assigned reading stands now it is like a joke without the punch line. Or, to put it another way, if you read the next two verses it is like moving from ambiguity to absolute clarity. As so often happens, the ever-impetuous disciple Peter forces the issue by asking Jesus, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times” (18.21) You have to hand it to Peter. He is trying to get it straight; and seven times is like

“going the limit.” But Jesus places the question of forgiveness in a whole new framework when he responds to Peter, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven” (18.22). Seventy times seven is tantamount to infinity . . . the river of forgiveness flows on forever.

For Jesus, faith in God is expressed through a life of forgiveness. Indeed, he embodied the ultimate of this forgiveness when he prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23.34). Thus Jesus calls us to be a people who forgive. Not to exclude, but to include . . . not to erect barriers, not to keep people out . . . but to bring them in, to widen the circle.

Of course we need only reflect for a moment to recognize and realize that these high sentiments on forgiveness and widening the circle are not easily achieved. Forgiveness does not readily translate as a normative way of life in our world. We eat, sleep and breathe just the opposite of forgiveness—which is anger. The Buddhist writer, Robert Thurman, describes our culture as “the most angry yet, in the sense of (the) most violent and militaristic culture yet apparent on this planet. In spite of our admiration for Athens, we are the Spartans’ Spartans, the Romans’ Romans, the Imperialists’ imperialists. We Americans in particular, still-in-denial heirs of the mass genocides of the Native Americans and the slavery holocaust of the African Americans, children of the Pentagon, wielders of nuclear weapons, producers of chemical and germ warfare agents of unprecedented virulence and quantity—our is the most militaristic culture ever to manifest on Mother Earth” (p. 21, *Anger*). In our culture of anger we live with the illusion that a preemptive strike will resolve all our difficulties. Internally, we position our emotional rockets, ever ready to be triggered, especially if we sense the slightest indication that the other person may be on the verge of launching his or her rockets of anger at us. We cynically rephrase the Golden Rule into “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you—only do it first.” We baptize our children into this culture of anger whenever a little league parent screams at a coach or referee, or physically attacks these individuals, or—as happened recently—kills a coach. Our competitive culture thrives on the notion of fighting your way to the top.

We assume the qualities of commitment, a pursuit of excellence, a desire to make this a better world are somehow not quite enough; there has to be some anger mixed in there. And—bottom line—don’t even think about forgiveness. You go around practicing this forgiveness stuff and guess what happens? People will think you are a wimp . . . or stupid . . . or crazy.. They will take advantage of you

Nevertheless, Jesus calls us to forgive. He calls us to widen the circle, recognizing that while anger excludes, forgiveness includes. He calls us to widen the circle, even though religions over the centuries have been riddled with anger, whether in the form of violent crusades, the subjugation of women, the abuses of the Inquisition, or the fanatical torture and death of so-called witches. He calls us to widen the circle, in spite of religious extremists around the world who draw lines of exclusion, who live with the delusion that they are God's elect and have a monopoly on the truth, and who commit the ultimate blasphemy of proclaiming that their violence and destruction has been ordained by God. And, ultimately, Jesus calls us to widen the circle because forgiveness is one of the most effective--if not THE most effective way--to make this world a better place. Forgiveness is the gateway to achieving love and compassion, the fundamental elements of a fulfilled and fulfilling life.

For forgiveness does not exist as the frail and feeble flower it is often portrayed to be. Indeed, forgiveness possesses a certain resiliency and inner stability and certainty. Rather than existing as some ephemeral will 'o the wisp, it has evolved through the numerous vicissitudes of life and owes its value and resiliency to a number of factors. Most basically, we forgive because we have experienced the restorative power of forgiveness in our lives. We find one of the most moving portrayals of God's forgiveness in the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is God's nature to forgive and to restore, rooted in the very dawn of being itself, when God looked upon creation and declared that it was good. We, in turn, have internalized this goodness in the Lord's Prayer, when we pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

We forgive because we know it is good for us. Fred Luskin, a psychologist working in the area of complementary medicine at our medical school, recently published a book whose title says it all, *Forgive for Good*. He cites several studies which indicate people who forgive generally enjoy better health and more fulfilling lives. When we live without forgiveness--clinging to our resentments and animosities . . . the insults we have received . . . the unfair treatment--we are more prone to live lives of anger, mistrust and emptiness. As some of you may know, Fred has put his theory into practice by convening group meetings with parents from Northern Ireland--both Catholic and Protestant--who have had children killed by the recurring violence. In their small groups they are encouraged to share their stories and then to move on, to express and receive forgiveness to and from one another--to move, hopefully, to a new Ireland of peace and purpose.

One of the great values of groups such as those convened by Fred, is that they reveal that so much resentment and anger are really byproducts rather than ends in themselves. Their roots may go back to early years of life when they experienced extensive abuse—physical, psychological, and/or sexual. Their anger may stem from the rage over being exploited, or perhaps try to cover the pain and embarrassment they have struggled with for years. The anger is enhanced by the sense of being unloved, especially if siblings appeared to be more favored. Anger may also provide a fleeting sense covering the fear of losing control; while, in fact, angry expressions of rage only feed the fear of losing control.

At this very moment we are witnessing rampant and disquieting expressions of anger by our fellow citizens in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, fueled by anguishing experiences of death, the overnight loss of the security of all their material goods, and the specter of little or no certain hopes for their future. Since their desperate plight is so vividly communicated to us daily on television and in the press, we can readily appreciate and endorse or forgiveness must include massive contributions to provide food and shelter, and rebuilding of their communities, immediate efforts to restore order, and a commitment to assist these individuals obtain a future for themselves and their family.

To forgive is indeed to Forgive for Good—for the good of the other person, for the good of our community, and for our own good. Not surprisingly, this recognition of our fundamental need to express and receive forgiveness has permeated all the major religions. In the prayer attributed to St. Francis, we pray, “Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is anger let me sew love . . . where there is injury pardon. In the Loving-Kindness Meditation, found in the Buddhist tradition, the cascading of forgiveness is found in the words, “May my friends be happy and well . . . May strangers be happy and well . . . May my enemies be happy and well.” In the Qur’an, Muslims are instructed, “You must forgive your servant (people who were ordinarily abused at that time) 70 times a day”—sentiments almost identical to those expressed by Jesus.

In our era we have been blessed by several individuals who have been persuasive embodiments of the transforming power of forgiveness—Martin Luther King, Jr., Bishop Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama. But the powerful model of forgiveness that remains most engaging in my mind occurs near the end of the movie Gandhi. Gandhi is frail and near the end of his quest for peace between the Muslims and the Hindus, which has yet to be realized, when a distraught father

asks him what he should do about the Muslims who have killed his only son. And Gandhi responds, “You must find a young Muslim boy whose parents have been killed by Hindus, and you must raise this child as your own.” That’s forgiveness. That’s widening the circle, for our good, for our community, and for our world. That is the labor of faith which undergirds this Labor Day weekend. Amen