
11th Sunday after Pentecost -2020
1 Corinthians 9:2-12 8 Matthew 18:23-35

There was a man who loved dogs. He read about them, studied them, and even gave talks about them. Well, one day, he decided to pour a new sidewalk in front of his house. As he put the finishing touches on the wet cement, a large dog walked across it, leaving its paw prints behind. The man muttered something under his breath and smoothed out the damage.

He then went into the shed to get some twine to put up a fence around the sidewalk. When he got back outside, he noticed more dog tracks in his fresh cement. So, he smoothed out the cement, put up the fence and went into the house. Five minutes later, he looked outside and saw some more paw prints. He was angry now. He got out his trowel and covered the prints again. As he got back to his porch, the dog returned and sat right in the middle of the sidewalk.

The man went ballistic. He dashed inside, grabbed his gun, and shot the dog dead. The neighbour rushed over and said, "Why, in heaven's name, did you do that? I thought you loved dogs." The man thought for a minute and said, "I do, I do like dogs. But that's in the abstract. I hate dogs in the concrete."

That's how most people feel about today's Gospel reading. We love to hear about forgiveness, but it is an entirely different matter when we must do it.

Our world is full of viruses that attack every friendship. Tensions rise, wrongs are done, lies are told, and trusts are broken. No one is perfect, so we're bound to have trouble with forgiveness. Relationships are built not on how perfect we are, but on how willing we are to ask for forgiveness and to forgive others. If we want to have relationships that last a long time, we must be willing to forgive those who have wronged us.

But forgiveness is costly because it's not easy to ask for forgiveness or extend forgiveness to those who've wronged us. Proverbs 18:19 says that "An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city, and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel." Why is it so problematic to forgive?

There are at least two reasons why we find it difficult to forgive others. Forgiveness is not natural, and it's not fair. That's why it's so tough to do. When we are hurting, we want to get even, not forgive.

When you think about it, there are stumbling blocks that keep us from forgiving others. It could be revenge, resentment or remembering. So, we set up a boundary for ourselves that we don't want to cross.

Some, like Peter, have asked this question at one time or another. "How many times do I have to forgive this person? I'm getting tired of putting up with it! Why does he/she keep bullying me?" Peter wanted Jesus to help him set some forgiveness limits when it's OK to say, "That's it. You've messed up one too many times! Now it's payback time!"

Jesus' answer to Peter was surprising and disarming. "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven times." Peter couldn't believe his ears. Seventy times seven means there is no limit to the number of times we are to forgive someone. Jesus is saying that you don't keep score when it comes to forgiveness. Like grace, mercy has a maddening quality about it because it is undeserved, unmerited, and unfair.

In our Gospel reading, the king was filled with compassion and did something unrequested by the man who owed him money. The king not only releases him, but he also forgives the debt. He wipes the slate clean, and cancels the debt. Now the man owes him nothing. I want you to notice that the servant didn't deserve this forgiveness; it was purely an act of grace and mercy on the king's part.

Instead of forgiving the wrong out of gratitude for the forgiveness he had received, the man whom Jesus forgave, "went off and had the man thrown in prison until he could pay the debt."

Many people are a lot like this man when they don't forgive others. They enjoy putting people in prison for the wrong they did. They want them to suffer, to hurt as bad as they hurt us. It's easy to put people in prison. We put people in prison by giving them the silent treatment, avoiding them, or calling them all kinds of nasty names.

But here's the irony of it all. While we often try to punish and imprison those who hurt us, the opposite happens. Many of us lock ourselves in an isolation chamber, continually torture ourselves in a cell of bitterness by our refusal to forgive. We imprison ourselves in the past and become locked out of all possibilities for change. Have you ever noticed that those who are unwilling to forgive are the most miserable people in the world? So, don't put off forgiveness. Don't allow the root of bitterness to grow into a tree of hatred and resentment. You will feel released from prison, and Jesus will be pleased with your progress as Christians.

Amen!