

Matthew 18:21-35  
September 11, 2011

South Plains

### A Path Toward Healing

Like you, I have been hearing story after story this past week about September 11, 2001. What has impressed me as much as the heroism of that day is the different ways people have dealt with the awful memories of that day in the course of the last ten years. We are slowly healing the physical scars on the side of the Pentagon, in downtown Manhattan, and on that hillside of Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The mental and emotional wounds are harder to heal although many Americans have turned their personal tragedies into a productive quest to make the world a better place. The ultimate healing for Christians is the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus Christ. But, how can forgiveness be relevant this weekend for us?

Many of us have found that forgiveness involves words that are easy to say and welcome to hear, but much harder to feel. Whether we are offering to forgive someone, or receiving forgiveness when we are in the wrong, it's an elusive quality. Do they really understand how deeply we've been hurt? Do they want to understand? Or, on the other side of forgiveness: How can I ever repay anyone for wrongs I've done? There's no answer to those questions. On the tenth anniversary of 9/11, forgiveness may not be uppermost on our minds as we struggle to make sense of those events and to find

a sensible response as a nation. Nevertheless, our deepest impulse is to seek healing for the hurt and loss we feel. The gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that deep healing is found in the grace of forgiveness.

Peter grapples with that reality when he comes to Jesus with a straightforward question: "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Or, must I forgive at all? Seven is a lot of times to say, "I forgive you. It's all right between us." But, Jesus replies that Peter just doesn't get it. "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Then the Bible translators tell us in a footnote that Jesus may have actually said, "Seventy times seven." The offer of forgiveness is unlimited. Grace abounds.

To be honest, that unlimited forgiveness is exactly why some people reject Christianity as too soft. How can anyone believe they should forgive and forgive and forgive? Jesus anticipates that criticism with a parable about the kingdom of God, how God shows forgiveness. A certain king decides to do an audit of his accounts. He finds that one of his servants has cooked the books. This servant owes the king an unspeakable amount of money. In order to recover a fraction of the theft and to set an example, the king decides to sell the servant, his wife and his children as slaves. Down on his knees goes the servant, "Have patience and I will pay you everything." That's a lie because he could not live long enough to pay off the debt. Surprisingly, the king takes pity on him and forgives the whole amount.

The parable is not over. As he leaves the palace, the servant comes across a friend who owes him money, a piddling amount. He grabs him by the throat and demands payment. Pleas for mercy and patience go unheeded. The second servant winds up in debtor's prison. With two incidents like these happening on the same day, word gets around the palace very quickly. The king scolds servant number one for his lack of mercy and then throws him into the torture chamber. Listen carefully to the lesson of Jesus' parable: "So my heavenly Father will also do to everyone one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or your sister from your heart."

I do not believe Jesus intends to frighten us into forgiving one another. He wants us to see that our forgiveness is rooted in God's forgiveness. God wants to forgive an ungodly amount of sin. There's no limit to grace; and that grace is the model, the standard for how we are to forgive. Imitate your heavenly Father. That's the only path to healing.

Other paths are dead ends. Grace is a delicate creature. If we hold it too tightly to ourselves, we smother it. There's no legal formula or recipe, as though too much grace could ruin the result. It's a reciprocal arrangement, an organic process between us and other people and God. Take away any of those three parties and the healing process stalls. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. It's a package deal.

Of course, that does not solve all the problems. As it was in the parable, some debts are so large they cannot be repaid. Some hurts are so deep, they cannot be undone. Worst of all, some offenders do not ask to be forgiven. South Africa's nightmare of apartheid resulted in a heritage of cruelty and hatred before the nightmare ended. The genius of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was that Desmond Tutu realized that reparations for the crimes of apartheid could never be enough. On the other side, the crimes committed in the course of resistance to apartheid were beyond restitution. Too many lives on both sides had been sacrificed. Therefore the goal of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was not retribution and punishment, but reconciliation by exposing the truth about the guilt of so many. In the clear light of day, they insured that crimes were publicly acknowledged in the hope that some forgiveness would be possible for the good of the whole country.

The example of South Africa may help us understand two other lessons that Jesus is teaching. First, that forgiveness is so slow and incremental that it must be repeated time and time again. And, second that forgiveness heals both the person who is guilty of the hurt and the person who experiences the hurt.

Forgiveness is slow and incremental, especially for the big, complicated offenses. In fact, the bigger the sin, the more times forgiveness needs to be repeated.

Recently, I got my feelings hurt by what another preacher said to me. At first, I forgave him easily. Then, I thought more about it. He didn't have to say that. I forgave him anyway because he's kind of insensitive. But, upon further reflection, I realized it was a stupid thing for him to say. I decided I could forgive his stupidity. You see where this is going. Gradually, however, I began to see some pride on my part, some appropriate anxiety on his part; and I could forgive more and more of his offense. Eventually, healing happened. Sometimes it takes seventy-seven times for the forgiveness to take hold.

Forgiveness is incremental. The words may be easy to say, but the reality may take years. Sometimes I think we short-circuit that process by offering forgiveness quickly. When the healing fails to happen immediately, we jump to the conclusion that the other person didn't really mean to beg our pardon. We cut him or her off from relationship and we lose the opportunity to see the process through to the end.

The second part of Jesus' teaching is that both parties need it. The person who is hurt needs to offer forgiveness in order to experience healing just as much as the wrong-doer needs to accept forgiveness. Sometimes it will be one-sided. Sometimes the murderer does not want to be forgiven. The catty person is satisfied that she has inflicted a wound. The cad is pleased with his rudeness. The suicide is not alive to

say, "I'm sorry." But, without forgiveness, no healing is possible for anyone.

I do not know what limits God places on grace. Certainly, this saying and parable indicate that's not our business. We will never approximate God's capacity to pardon us. Therefore, our only rule is to keep extending pardon, for our sakes. The bitterness we leave in our hearts does us no good. But, every time we whisper, "I forgive him. I forgive her. I forgive them," with all our hearts, we drain a little more of that bitterness from our souls. And, we leave room for a little more of God's grace in our lives. When the end of life comes, I want to have lost as much of that bitterness as possible.

I suppose that's why the Lord says, "Vengeance is mine." Left to us, revenge and retribution give satisfaction that is short-lived, often leaving a residue of bitterness. God takes that job for God's self. That's why Jesus tells his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane to put away their swords. That's why scripture never directs or encourages retribution for the crucifixion. God has taken the hit in Jesus, and that is enough.

Grace alone opens up the future, pulling the poison of regret, creating an environment for healing, and making space for reconciliation. The hard lesson for Peter, and maybe for us, is that it doesn't happen in an instant. It may take seven times seventy offers of forgiveness.

When we lived in Portsmouth, Virginia, an old waterman insisted, to my delight, that I build a walkway out into our little creek. He dumped a load of lumber in the backyard and instructed me in the use of an instrument he called his doozy. He had filled a one gallon can with concrete and fitted it with a handle. It was a doozy for pounding 4x4 pilings into the mud. "Don't try to hit them hard," he said. "Let the weight of the doozy do the work. Let it drop ten times on the piling, then rest before doing it another ten times. That way, the job gets done little by little and you don't hurt yourself." It was a great lesson, not only in pounding, but also in living. Large jobs get done incrementally. We've got major healing to do in our country and in our lives.

Forgiveness that is rooted in God's grace will take time. It may take more than seven times. Maybe seventy-seven times. The reward is God's healing. What will you do to make your world a better and safer place?