

16 September 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Smith

**Hymns: 103 God is love, let heaven adore him
495 Dear Lord and Father of mankind
455 All my hope of God is founded
661 Give me the faith which can remove**

**Readings: Genesis 50.15-21
Matthew 18:21-35**

“Seventy times seven”

Prayer

Let us pray. Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh Lord our strength, and our redeemer.

Amen

Friends, we are here today about forgiveness. Giving it, receiving it – going on with life after it

comes, or doesn't. And what makes it possible! And we have two stories from scripture – bluntly, one where it worked, and one where it didn't.

Jacob's sons got it from Joseph their younger brother – the debtor in Jesus' parable to Peter didn't get it, and missed his second chance for freedom.

Like Peter, I have some issues with forgiveness and I want to confront Jesus with them just as much as he did. And like Peter, I want forgiveness to work! Across my own kitchen table, and also in every conflict in our world – we need it! Because we know peace making is not durable without it.

In general I hope we leave today feeling that forgiveness is a good thing. Not just something to which we are called, and commanded by the Gospel (we are), but something which is our secret well of strength to overcome the most deeply personal hurts, as much the great sins of our history – the basis of all our freedom, of every good night's sleep and every carefree day. I claim forgiveness as our inheritance thinking about Sierra Leone, and the

American south, and every act of violence – I claim forgiveness as an antidote to the climate of fear on a bus when a man who looks one way or another carrying a rucksack gets on this week anywhere in London. Forgiveness may be deeply personal, but it is not a private gift.

I hope we remember that forgiveness like every gift of grace is a mystery – and like Peter we may look for concrete instructions and practical ways – protections and caveats - we should dare to confront Jesus in prayer just as much as Peter did to his face – and like Peter, we will hear again nothing but good news of sins forgiven. No contract, no tit for tat, simple love pouring a healing stream.

First, let's think about what it is to give forgiveness – then, secondly, to receive it. And perhaps some things that make each harder, or more possible.

Im not calling on us not to go somewhere we should not, but perhaps just now, I ask you to think of a time when you have been hurt. Hurt is real.

I am thinking of a person of my acquaintance, who had a great wrong done to them many years ago in another country. This great wrong was deeply personal, ending a life – and it was also a tiny part of a great historical wrong.

Last year one of the people who did the wrong was back in touch with my acquaintance, and far from offering any apology or asking forgiveness wanted to gloss over what had happened, wanted my friend to accept his version of what had happened – insisted on coming to my friend's home and table, and ate the food and took the hospitality.

My friend was rightly troubled in their spirit. All mixed up and angry all over, hurt and afraid. That one that unwelcome visitor made my friend again feel powerless and at the mercy of violence.

My friend came to speak to me with Peter's question – must I forgive? How can I? And deeply troubled, slow speaking in anger and dismay.

And the man had said he would come back, wanted more and other support from my acquaintance. Validation of his view of what had happened.

Am I going to tell my friend it is the duty of every Christian to forgive? YES. But not like something that man could just take off the shelf like in a shop, not even noticing the one who stocked the shelf or made the product.

We talked about a strategy to put on forgiveness, to claim power back. Even without the truth being told by all parties – Sometimes truth we must leave to God – we talked about a strategy to commend the man from long ago on his way with nothing but compassion – but remembering that my friend is no longer powerless. No longer subject to violence. The home no longer subject to invasion, fear.

I also suggested that if the unwelcome visitor returned, perhaps my friend would invite the person to come to our church to have a proper Christian welcome instead of to the home on their own – perhaps my friend would let us all greet and offer

hospitality to this one who so wanted to wipe a conscience on my friend, with so little idea of how to do it. Let him come and see what forgiveness looks like when it's done by all of us together.

My friend LAUGHED at that suggestion. Long and hard thinking about what it would have been like to have met the long ago person not just alone, but in the company of all the strong armed women and well loving men of their church. Welcomed with nothing but compassion and strength that would not see one of us any of us harmed again, and would not give up the privilege of welcome but neither let my friend be alone with the one who had so wounded. I could see the power of God's love restored in my friend's laugh.

And of course, when we are faced with the choice to forgive or not, we are in each other's company, each other's prayers though we be dispersed all over this city. Held.

It can be a good thing to try on forgiveness before we are completely ready to offer it - as if trying on a

pair of trousers half way through a diet that we know ARE going to fit but are still too tight THIS week – and sometimes offering forgiveness is a thing we come back to again and again, pushing it a little further into the corners of our hearts each time. And yet, being commanded to forgive before we are ready, or having the Christian imperative to forgive held over us like a brick bat, when a hurt is unresolved, can redouble an abuse done to us. Or done to a people. ‘When are African Americans going to get over slavery?’ Asks more than one commentator.

We may be called to be sacrificial, to clothe ourselves in service and humility, and to accept great hardship but I do not believe we are called to be a doormat for someone to wipe feet on without care. When we are a doormat, we have resources to understand and deal with that, but I do not think we the subjection or abuse of any person is EVER in God’s plan. When it happens, God will work with it – look at Joseph and his brothers – but I do not think God intends our hurt.

I want us to think of offering forgiveness as claiming power in a situation where it has been taken away from us. Being a doormat is not a Gospel value, though service is, and sacrifice both.

Such a subtle exchange – forgiveness as claiming power, but not the power of worldly victory or getting one over in an ‘I’ll show them’ vindictive fervor, but rather the power of grace – I think about forgiveness when I think about Michelle Obama saying ‘When they go low, we go high,’ refusing to give over the power of her integrity when she or her family was attacked.

It is absolutely the heart of the Good news, and we are commanded to it, to forgive one another as we are forgiven.

Which doesn’t make it easy, or without difficulty.

SO that’s a glimpse, and only one, of what it might be to forgive. Now let’s look at what it is to be forgiven.

I have another true story to lay alongside our scripture, this one not about giving forgiveness but needing it.

Again, without going anywhere we ought not, I want to ask you to connect with the feeling of having done something which we know is going to cause harm or hurt – maybe on purpose, maybe by mistake – and to connect with the feeling of dread which is in the moment after it is done, when it can't be taken back, and before it is found out.

Something you don't yet know about me is that I'm not the best driver of cars. Though I'm better with cars than vans! I don't have a car, but I can drive, and well enough that you don't need to jump into the shrubbery if you spot me coming down City Road. But I'm not the best.

And when I read these scriptures and got into that moment AFTER I've done something to cause harm and BEFORE it's found out, into that moment pregnant with possibility – I go immediately to a weekday afternoon in the summer I was 21, when I

had just got my driving license and had permission to drive my parents' little silver Honda civic hatchback.

In the picture on my first license, taken just after I passed my road test, I had a distinct look of surprise - it was honest.

My parents' car lived on a wide flat open drive opening onto a wide flat open street.

And I had a series of conversations with each of my parents of the kind that parents have with adult children about wing mirrors, and attention, and the like. And I had said all the things adult children do in those conversations. I can see some of you have had them too. Perhaps are leading up to one this afternoon!

So this lovely summer afternoon in let's say 1992 in suburban Massachusetts, all the windows were open and the sound of a piano lesson from the house across the street – a beautiful day – and I got in the car and pulled out of the drive in one clean

movement, smack into the car parked across the street, belonging to the neighbour's piano teacher.

And there was the first of a series of moments pregnant with possibility. I remember hearing the piano music continue, then I remember hearing it stop, sharply.

I don't actually remember much more of the next minute or two, but I do remember with perfect clarity the moments later that day (this was before cell phones and instant messaging, remember) after my Mom had got home, but before my Dad got home. I remember sitting in the kitchen sweating bullets, sure my life was over. Thinking about how hard my parents worked and how little money we had, and a variety of other things including why the piano teacher would park there of all places. Another pregnant moment.

When we talk about forgiveness, of course we are talking about a situation where things are broken, where something is not right and hurt has been done or resources wasted. Pain is real, and sometimes

things cannot be put right. A car is a car, but a heart – or a nation, or an act of violence – forgiveness is a complicated command to keep.

My Dad came in the house, quietly. Some of you met my parents in the last weeks, they really are not that scary, but this was a BIG DEAL.

He came into the kitchen and looked at me, and said nothing. He simply held out the car keys to me, and I took them – and he narrowed his eyes briefly in a way that I've remembered every time I adjust a wing mirror since – and he turned around and left.

And I worked and together we paid for the repair, and the piano teacher accepted my apology, and the honda lived to tell the tale and I'm sure I have done things that are far more harmful in far more searching ways since. And had done to me.

But my Dad's response has stayed with me as an example of forgiveness. The sense of relief I felt, of freedom – of humility – it is still with me and it is perfect freedom. And I still had to put right what I could, which was hard. He clearly knew I was

ashamed, he and Mom had every right to punish me, and there were clear consequences – whomever forgave who, we still had to pay the several hundreds of dollars damage and we did not have it.

And he just handed me the keys and sent me back out – fearful, chastened, still a little arrogant, still not the world’s best driver. But his forgiveness in that pregnant moment birthed me another small step into adulthood – one little step among many. And I hope it taught me a little generosity. This is the crucial exchange though – that we learn generosity, compassion for another, through the great love someone holds for us. Not, like the servant in Jesus’ story, learning only protective defensiveness, but getting release.

What I didn’t know then was that my Dad had been angry enough to tear me limb from limb, certainly take away the car and much more besides, and that Mom had met him at the door and taken him out in the garden, and had walked him up and down until

he had calmed down enough to be in control of the decision about what to do.

Just like in the scriptures, just like in our first story about my friend and that unwelcome visitor from the past, forgiveness needs a community – sometimes we need to give each other permission to find space for it – Peter asked Jesus to spell out exactly what he owed in terms of doing it, tell me what my rights are – Jesus typically, tells him love has no ends, no edges when it is God who gives it.

And if forgiveness has more of a chance with community, then it certainly has more of a chance when we have time – I think of God as present like a midwife in those moments of pregnant possibility when something has happened and before we have responded – calling us to forgiveness calling us to claim the grace which is strength and justice and gives us freedom from anyone who would harm us, and when we harm others. As God is the midwife in those moments we too are to be midwives – peacemakers, not doormats – powerful in compassion.

Giving, receiving forgiveness certainly needs truth telling. And about much more than wing mirrors. Forgiveness implies relationship, which means risk of more harm. And sometimes the truth is only heard by God's ears. But God does hear.

TO give, to receive forgiveness is a gift of Christian life, and it is the gift God offers each of us. In the most deeply personal moments, and in the great movement of history.

I called my Dad on Friday to see if I remembered the story of the car correctly – we all know our minds create story back into events, and how we tell the stories of our wounds and our wounding is a gracious thing, part of who we are.

My Dad listened as I told the story – it is so vivid in my memory – then there was a pause on the phone. 'I don't remember it at all,' he said.

Let those who have ears to hear, hear.

