

Last Sunday we heard how Matthew's faith community was to address conflict in their midst. They are to confront the person who has offended them and then if the person refuses to apologize or change their behavior they are to take it to the church and if the person still refuses to change their behavior the church is to treat that person as a Gentile or tax collector. And we all know how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors, he spent time with them and ate with them! He never gave up on them! The next piece is from this morning's gospel passage, where Peter says, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (Matt 18:21-22) Jesus is actually referring back to Gen 4: 23-24, Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." Jesus is telling his disciples that it is time to move beyond the revenge and violence that began with Cain murdering Abel.

In the parable that follows Jesus statement about forgiveness the King's example of forgiveness is astounding! The servant owes the king 60 million days' wages, one commentary said it was equivalent to a third of what the Roman army cost to operate for one year. Jesus is using hyperbole to get across his message that God's mercy and forgiveness are beyond our comprehension. The servant's response is one that aligns with his culture, he goes to someone who owes him money and uses violence against that person.

Some Biblical scholars think that the parable ends with the King saying, "I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" (Matt 18:33) The verses after this sound a lot like Matthew with his refrain of the king sending people to the place *where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*.

Jesus teaches his disciples to follow Lev. 19:17-18, *Don't secretly hate your neighbor. If you have something against him, get it out into the open; otherwise you are an accomplice in his guilt. "Don't seek revenge or carry a grudge against any of your people. "Love your neighbor as yourself."* Jesus calls us to move beyond our desire for revenge and violence. Jesus is telling us for the sake of our own health and well being to move beyond our desire for revenge and violence.

While at seminary the student body one semester engaged in a series of presentations and discussions about the death penalty. Many churches including the Roman Catholic and Episcopal Church have come out as opposed to this punishment, but it is still the type of ethics discussion the seminarians are encouraged to wrestle with. We heard one presentation by a former parole officer, now seminarian about how she had twice debated the topic using the Bible as her only source. She argued for it and against it and won both debates which of course leaves us with an interesting problem. So what do we do on this difficult topic? The final speaker in the series was an Episcopal priest from Richmond.

His son, a college student, had been working at a 7-11 late one evening when a robbery occurred. The robber was so worried that this young man would be able to identify him

that he shot him even though he did everything the robber asked. The robber was quickly arrested and brought to trial. The priest and his wife attended every day of the trial and all he could think about and pray for was that the robber would be convicted and sentenced to death. The robber was convicted and it was time for the victim's statement prior to the judge pronouncing sentence. As the priest drove to the courthouse to read his carefully prepared remarks he began to think about the blistering speech that he had written, filled with anger and hate. Then he began to cry. He cried so hard he had to pull to the side of the road. As he sat there in the car with his wife he said, I can't do this. He looked at his wife and said I have every right to demand the death penalty for this terrible crime. However the day they kill this murderer they will kill my soul once and for all. I now realize that I must turn the other cheek. I have become no better than the murderer for my soul is consumed with hatred and anger that it will die with him. I cannot continue to preach the love of Christ if I demand this execution.

He faced a choice of surrendering to hate or surrendering to Christ. He ended by saying the question that hit him on the road was, who would Jesus execute?

This priest recognized that the hate and anger in his heart would destroy him. This would render him unable to truly teach and preach the words of Christ. He realized that by demanding his right to vengeance he would add a third lost life, his own. He had to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, give up his cloak as well if he was to live into Christ's teachings. He became a leading advocate to abolish the death penalty. His reason is because of what he believes it does to the survivors.

The Priest's hate and anger, his desire for revenge was literally killing him. He was bound by the murder's act of violence and not free. Only when he could forgive the murderer was he free to move forward in his life. Only through surrendering to Christ, trusting that God would deal with the murderer was the priest free to be the person God had created him to be.

When we fail to forgive another we are failing to live a life of gratitude to God. Forgiveness is not denying our hurt nor is it 'forgive and forget,' it is working for justice and reconciliation that will bring peace. If we can forgive someone who has hurt us then we are free of that person's influence on our lives. We are not carrying that person around with us as extra baggage in our lives. We can move forward to share God's love with our world, giving the offender over to God and trusting that God will deal with that person.

Here is a metaphor for what happens when we fail to forgive another. A teacher once told each of her students to bring a clear plastic bag and a sack of potatoes to school. For every person they refuse to forgive in their life's experience, they chose a potato, wrote on it the name and date, and put it in the plastic bag. Some of their bags were quite heavy.

They were then told to carry this bag with them everywhere for one week, putting it beside their bed at night, on the car seat when driving, next to their desk at work.

The hassle of lugging this around with them made it clear what a weight they were carrying spiritually, and how they had to pay attention to it all the time to not forget and keep leaving it in embarrassing places.

Naturally, the condition of the potatoes deteriorated to a nasty smelly slime.

This was a great metaphor for the price we pay for keeping our pain and heavy negativity. Too often we think of forgiveness as a gift to the other person, but it clearly is for ourselves.

*Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. (Matt 18: 21-22)*

Go and do likewise.