

THE HEART OF THE MATTER
Sermon for Pentecost 14A – Mt 18:21-35
LPC, 9/14/14

I'm trying to get down to the heart of the matter, but my will gets weak, and my thoughts seem to scatter, but I think it's about forgiveness...forgiveness, even if... even if you don't love me any more.

I'm dating myself again, but some of you will recognize the lyrics to a song from the 80's by Don Henley, erstwhile lead singer of the Eagles. The song is written from the standpoint of a person trying to make sense of a failed love affair. The person is trying to do this honestly and without resorting to recrimination. He reaches the conclusion that the relationship cannot be restored, but he still feels the need to ask forgiveness of his former lover.

This song is remarkable, if not unique, in the context of popular culture. I can't think of another example of a popular work that focuses on the concept of forgiveness.

For Christians, forgiveness really does come close to the heart of the matter. I touched on this last week when I preached about how Jesus calls us to be family, not only to our blood-families, but to our church families, and, as God gives us grace, to the world beyond. I said that one aspect of being family was the readiness to forgive. I preached this in the context of Jesus' teaching that when your brother sins against you, you go to considerable lengths to restore the relationship.

In today's Gospel reading, we get the continuation of that teaching about being family. Peter asks what a reasonable limit is on forgiveness within the family, and Jesus replies that forgiveness basically extends beyond all reason. (In cultural context "77 times" basically means to time out of mind.) Jesus follows this with an illustration involving a slave who is forgiven a massive debt, but who then turns around and refuses to forgive the minuscule debt owed him by a fellow slave.

Let's try not to focus too much on the denouement of this story, where the master angrily condemns the unforgiving slave to prison. We should not take this as an indication of how God acts with us. Jesus is proof that God is far less concerned with punishing us for our ungenerosity than with trying to convince us to be generous.

The point of this parable, put simply, is that Jesus wants his followers to forgive each other, if for no other reason than because God has forgiven us much.

Those who would follow Jesus need to follow Jesus in being forgiving. Jesus frequently pronounced forgiveness. In Jesus' ministry, forgiveness is closely linked with healing. Remember the lame man who was lowered to Jesus through the ceiling of the house? Jesus first told him he was forgiven. It was later, after the Pharisees objected to Jesus pronouncing forgiveness, that Jesus told the man, "Take up your pallet and walk," and the man did. Forgiveness for Jesus is synonymous with healing and liberation.

To be followers of Jesus, we need to forgive, and we need to teach our children to forgive. This is hard, because forgiveness can only be taught by example, and we have precious few examples of forgiveness in our popular culture as I mentioned earlier. If someone sins against you, according to our

popular culture, you sue. Our public figures, whether in sports or politics, never apologize and never forgive. Our children are not going to learn forgiveness from the popular culture. They are going to have to learn it at home and at church.

The problem is that there is no idiom for forgiveness. Think about it. We all know to say “You’re welcome,” when someone says “Thank you.” But what do you say when someone says, “I’m sorry”? “You’re forgiven,” or “Apology accepted,” sound awfully high-handed in practice, as if we want to further punish the person apologizing. To say, “Oh, it’s nothing,” or “Don’t think of it,” isn’t really perfect because those responses tend to devalue the person’s apology.

Miss Manners taught that the proper response to an apology was the phrase, “It’s all right,” unless you wanted to convey that the apology was not really accepted, in which case the response was, “That’s. Perfectly. All. Right.”

I would like to suggest that we really need an idiomatic response to an apology that really conveys the sense of forgiveness. Once again, let’s look at “What would Jesus do?” Jesus said things like, “Your faith has healed you. Go in peace.” Perhaps the best response to an apology, following Jesus’ example, is to say, “Be at peace.”

So, we have the directive to forgive, and we have a proposed model for expressing forgiveness. But what if the person who wrongs us does not apologize, and isn’t even sorry? Surely we are then justified in withholding forgiveness?

Once again, what did Jesus do? Although the Bible isn’t explicit on this point, I am convinced, from the way the scene between Jesus and Pilate is described in the Bible, that Jesus forgave Pilate, even though Pilate had no evident remorse for ordaining Jesus’ execution. The Bible is however explicit that Jesus from the cross forgave those who killed him” “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Jesus forgave people even when they weren’t sorry. Jesus calls us to the same standard of behavior, as hard as this might be. The reason is that we need to forgive in order to be truly free.

Ultimately, Jesus wants us to forgive others not for the offender’s sake, but for our own sake. Jesus desires that we be healed, that we be free, and in order to be healed and free we must forgive.

I appeal to us all today (and that includes myself, because as you must know I always preach to myself as well), that if there is any anger or resentment or sense of being wronged, to cut it loose, set it free, and say to the one or ones who have hurt us, “Be at peace,” and strive, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to mean it.

The heart of the matter is, as Don Henley sang, about forgiveness, but forgiveness is not the heart of the matter per se. The heart of the matter is love, and love in turn means, at least in part, forgiveness. There is no love without forgiveness. There is no forgiveness without love.

Let’s try to get down to the heart of the matter. And let us be at peace.