

THINK ABOUT IT
Sermon for Pentecost 15A-Mt 18:21-35
LPC, 9/17/17

Back when I was teaching preschool to 2- and 3-year-olds, I remember a time when two of the kids were playing Mommy and Daddy with one of the stuffed animals as their child. Apparently the stuffed animal misbehaved so “Daddy” put it in the “Time Out” chair, saying, with perfect adult intonation, “Now, you just sit there and think about it!” The implication clearly was that, given time, the stuffed animal would realize the error of its ways, apologize, and be readmitted into civilized society.

As was so often the case, these tiny children were perfectly modelling a theological situation: that of falling into sin, repenting and returning to the Lord, which is what we vow to do when each of us is baptized. This is part of the process of forgiveness and restoration into relationship that we are promised is available to us through Jesus Christ. When we realize we have transgressed, we are supposed to “think about it,” hopefully arriving at a point of repentance, and asking for forgiveness, which we are told is readily available.

What I see in my current line of work is people who have “thought about it” enough to the point of regretting their action and wishing to repent, but who have somehow failed to accept the waiting forgiveness of their loving Father-God (Or Mother-God, if you prefer.) So they continue to think about their sin, resulting in a nagging sense of unworthiness. Of course, none of us is perfect, but this is the kind of person who never feels he or she is “good enough.”

Before I go on I think it would be useful to do a little word study on the biblical sense of the word translated “sin” in the New Testament. The word is ἁμαρτία, *hamartia*, which is a word used in the sport of archery for missing the mark. It may be helpful to think of sin in this way rather than associating it with a specific sin like breaking one of the Ten Commandments. Many of us, even if we don’t carry around guilt for a specific sin, have a lingering sense of consistently missing the mark. And let’s face it, there’s often good reason for this.

Many people who get stuck at the stage of thinking about their sins suffer from what I will call the Unforgiven Syndrome. The symptoms of this syndrome are many. Depression is one. Moral paralysis is another. But a very common and insidious symptom of the Unforgiven Syndrome is the inability to forgive others for *their* lack of perfection.

My hypothesis is that the failure to fully accept the reality of God’s forgiveness of oneself results in the inability to forgive other people. If we can’t, deep down, conceive of the possibility that our sin, our missing the mark, can be erased by an infinitely gracious God, we’re going to have trouble conceiving of erasing the sins of others against us.

There is a relationship, some sort of equation, between awareness of being forgiven and being able to be forgive. We see this in the teachings of Jesus -- first, in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” And we see it today in Matthew’s Gospel lesson and the parable of the Ungrateful Slave.

In this story a king forgives a servant, who given the enormous some of money involved is probably more of a finance minister. The debt is ten thousand talents. To give an idea of this

stupendous sum, Herod, King of Judea, received an annual tribute income of 900 talents from all of his lands combined, and this sum is eleven times that amount.

Instead of passing this good luck forward, the slave, or the minister, if you prefer, insists that his own debtor pay him back in full. Now the amount involved in this second debt is much smaller, but not insignificant: roughly equivalent to three months' wages. Upon hearing of this ungenerosity, the king has the minister arrested and tortured. It is unclear to me how the torture conduces toward repayment of the debt. But that's beside the point.

Matthew has Jesus conclude the parable by saying, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." This is a bit problematic, presenting a vindictive picture of God that is inconsistent with the idea of a God who stands for forgiving seventy times seven times.

The parable format does not require us to fully identify the character of the king with God. For my part I believe that God's capacity for forgiveness is unimaginably huger than human capacity, even when a person has sinned as badly as the minister in this story, and I do not believe that God revokes a forgiveness once given.

The point I am trying to make from the Parable of the Ungrateful Slave is that the minister's behavior is typical of one who has not truly internalized God's forgiveness. I see this minister's inability to forgive in myself. I see it in other Christians. And I believe that the inability to forgive others stems from our inability to forgive ourselves. Of course we are unable to forgive ourselves if we believe our sins are unforgiveable. And so the cycle of sin goes on.

Jesus desires to break this cycle. Jesus wants us to accept God's forgiveness so that we may forgive others. And we forgive others not so much for their sake, but for ours. Because to retain the sins of any, to continue to think about them, is paralyzing and imprisoning, and Jesus desires us to be free.

This means that our forgiveness of others does not necessarily depend on their apology. We have no control over what other people do, but we can refuse to allow them to control us. And as long as we fail to forgive another's sin, that person has power over us.

There are several methods out there that aim to facilitate forgiveness. The one with which I am most familiar is the Enright model. You can look it up online, or ask me for a paper copy. These models typically begin with acknowledging the reality of the injury and the depth of the reactive emotion and moving on to an attempt to understand the offender and, finally, release the strong emotional reactivity

These are good models with proven effectiveness in liberating the forgiver from oppressive memories. But as a Christian I believe the first step must be to fully accept the idea the God can forgive us our hamartia, both our individual sins and our chronic missing of the mark. To understand that forgiveness is even possible we have to understand that we ourselves are forgivable. Before we can forgive we must forgive ourselves. To forgive ourselves we must both desire and accept that God forgives us.

Think about it.