

Romans 14:1-12
February 21, 2010

Matthew 18:21-35
St. James U.C.C.

SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN

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When I was growing up as a good little Protestant, I always wondered about the sacrament of penance that my Catholic friends dutifully performed “Three Hail Mary’s” maybe “Two Our Father’s” – as a kind of payment for absolution in the confessional. I always wondered why as they went to confession they discussed what they could tell the priest or what they couldn’t. My friends made up things for the priest so to me that was double sin. What did penance have to do with it? It never made sense to me when I just had to just ask God for forgiveness and I was forgiven. Of course the priest had nothing on my parents who, after catching me in the act of “something I ought not to have done” would have something like, “Ok, your grounded for a week and suddenly, the meaning of penance became clear.

“How many times”, said Peter, “should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me? Is seven times enough?” Have you ever wondered what in the world was going on in Peter’s head that day? Was there someone Peter had in mind? Someone who had sinned against him time and time again, was it someone who was close to him? Perhaps we have the same type of problem in our own lives. Can’t you hear us saying, hay Jesus I’m really trying to do the right thing but it’s sure hard to forgive over, and over, and over again. How often do I have to forgive someone who is insulting me, some one who makes mock on me. How much are we expected to take, how many second chances are we to give? Bless Peter, he sure tries, “should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me? Is seven times enough?” Seven is the number assigned to God by tradition, the number that is regarded as the emblem of perfection. Seven is a divine number.

William Willimon writes, “the human animal is not supposed to be good at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence, these are natural human qualities. It is natural for the human animal to defend

itself, to snarl and couch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is not natural. It is not a universal human virtue.”

Peter is really trying to be all that God wants when he asks Jesus, “if forgiving some one seven times is enough”. How often do we ask forgiveness? Do we even ask seven times? Jesus tells not seven times but seventy times seven”. That’s 490 times, how would you keep track of that? Do I go to the Excell spreadsheet on my computer? Would my spreadsheet read, “Forgiveness of Mary”? Monday I forgave her 2 times, Tues I forgot to forgive her, Wed three times. When I get to 490 can I then let go, be mean and hateful or be distant and never trust her again? Doesn’t make sense does it, its like the fisherman who works so hard to catch the big one that he misses the fun and relaxation of the sport. It’s like the golfer who is so wrapped up in her score that she doesn’t enjoy her walk on the course and the companionship of her fellow golfers.

Keeping score is ridiculous, and harmful. The New England Journal of Medicine reports that type A personalities (long thought to be particularly prone to cardiovascular illness) are no more likely than anyone else to suffer heart attack or stroke. The culprit, researchers say is anger. A type A person is in danger only if they carry around unresolved hostility. It is anger, not activity, that places a person at risk.” Think about it faith and good health go hand and hand. We are not only causing harm to the person we are resentful and angry at but harmful to ourselves. The person who keeps score is almost always the biggest loser.

As we continued in the story the King forgave his servant but the servant in turn didn’t forgive his fellow servant. The servant was in debt to his master. If we talked about it in today’s terms it probably was tens of thousands of dollars that he couldn’t pay back. The servant pleaded with his master for more time to settle his account. The master must have been quite a man because he not only release him but forgave him his debt as well.

Here’s where it gets interesting. The servant had just been forgiven a large amount was approached by a fellow servant who owned him a small amount. Instead of following the

masters example he had him thrown into jail where it was impossible to earn any money to pay the debt. When the king heard of this he called the servant “a worthless slave” and sent him to jail. It teaches us a lesson that run through out the New Testament, a man must forgive in order to be forgiven. “Blessed are the merciful,” said Jesus, “for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt. 5:7). “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matt. 6: 14,15).

There is a story that goes like this, a women had a very obnoxious neighbor and he put her in a bad mood every morning as she worked over her sink she could see him when she was fixing breakfast. He would be leaving for work. One day as she watched him leave and the resentment began to build she said a prayer, “He is a person for whom Christ died”. That morsel of theological insight, applied to her neighbor was the answer to her resentment. The point is that God doesn’t keep track with us and we shouldn’t do it with others. The Gospel tells us that we can come to God over and over again. We can start fresh each day, if we know and believe that. Sometimes distance, or death can keep us from forgiving. Sometimes forgiveness is not accepted; too much time has passed, too much is changed. God shows us mercy it is easier for us to show mercy to others. But we can pray to God when it is too late, when things seem beyond us, we can say. “please God, I can’t forgive this, please do it for me take this hurt from me and bring your gift of healing.”

Nothing that we have to forgive can even faintly or remotely compare with what we have been forgiven. We have been forgiven a debt, which is beyond all paying for the sin of man brought about the death of God’s own Son. If that is so we must forgive to others as God has forgiven us.

In writing to the Christians at Rome, Paul plays down the differences among us that often lead to harsh words, divisive judgments, and hurtful actions. Paul reintroduces the priorities that should govern the Christian life. It is “walking in love” with one another, avoiding doing things that offend or injure others, overlooking choices and attitudes that

offend us. There will be times when one sins against another, violating a trust, speaking falsehoods, disrupting a family, and damaging a reputation. At such times, assuming the offending person expresses sorrow and asks for forgiveness, Jesus expects that we will have the same pity and compassion as God has with us rather than the vindictive spirit of the slave in the gospel. We are all servants of the Lord and beholden to God's mercy.

PRAYER

Open our hearts dear God so that we are forgiving and loving.

Amen