

Dreghorn and Springside Parish Church, Sunday 13th September 2020

Bible Reading: Matthew 18:21-35, the Good News Bible

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?" ²² "No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven, ²³ because the Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who decided to check on his servants' accounts. ²⁴ He had just begun to do so when one of them was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. ²⁵ The servant did not have enough to pay his debt, so the king ordered him to be sold as a slave, with his wife and his children and all that he had, in order to pay the debt. ²⁶ The servant fell on his knees before the king. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay you everything!' ²⁷ The king felt sorry for him, so he forgave him the debt and let him go. ²⁸ "Then the man went out and met one of his fellow servants who owed him a few dollars. He grabbed him and started choking him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he said. ²⁹ His fellow servant fell down and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!' ³⁰ But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were very upset and went to the king and told him everything. ³² So he called the servant in. 'You worthless slave!' he said. 'I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. ³³ You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you.' ³⁴ The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount." ³⁵ And Jesus concluded, "That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Sermon "Forgiving without Reservation"

Last May, when I was serving as Chaplain to Royal Marines, I went a battlefield tour with other military chaplains. Not to the World War battlefields of France or Belgium, but to Northern Ireland, where we have seen much more recent conflict. We visit the places, we listened to stories from differing perspectives and we experienced some of the yet unresolved tension.

One of the significant events was a visit to New Life City Church, it is a congregation that straddles the Peace Wall between the traditionally Catholic and Protestant areas in west Belfast. And there we listened to the story of the congregation, told by their Pastor Jack McKee. Here is his story in his own words, "We're in the position now where we're accepted in the heart of both the Shankill and the Falls communities and its drawn people together in both communities in ways that I never imagined. Sometimes it's absolutely bewildering. There was one day in our coffee shop - we'd have over 400 people in our coffee shop every single day - and there were eight of us just sitting round the table, just talking. And then it dawned on me - one, me, was ex-UDR, one was ex-RUC, there were two ex-UDA/UFF, there was ex-UVF, there was one ex-PIRA and one ex-Official IRA all sitting around in that same circle. We didn't orchestrate it. We were just friends, just sitting having a coffee and talking to each other." He then goes on to say, "I remember a few years ago Arlene Foster saying how she dreamed of a place where people could sit together and drink coffee together without fear of threat or intimidation. Arlene, we're living your dream here." (*Article appeared in the Belfast Telegraph 25th June 2018*)

Pastor Jack McKee spoke with us on the hurt, betrayal and anger felt in both communities and also of the reconciliation and forgiveness that had been found through Jesus Christ. Reconciliation and forgiveness that had been essential in enabling people to let go of the past, move on, to dream of a better future for them and their families and then to step into it. Forgiveness involves stopping the blame game and letting go of anger. Forgiveness is not about denying justice to take its rightful

course, but it is about getting perspective, letting go of pain and hurt, so you can be free and others can be free, to get back on with living.

In our Bible story today, Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I forgive him? Seven times?"

Here we see that Peter is catching on to who Jesus is. He knows Jesus is a Messiah and that he doesn't think or act like other people, so in asking this question he shows the Messiah that he is learning. If Peter were to ask this question the usual way, he would say, "Shall I forgive as many as two or three times?"

This would have been the teaching of the Rabbi's: to forgive, yes, go ahead. Forgive once and you're being generous. To forgive twice would be excellent. But you'd be a fool to get hurt the third time.

Peter knows that Jesus thinks outside the box. So, Peter makes this bold move: "Forgive as many as seven times?" Well, that would be absurd, but it might just be the number Jesus is looking for, after all it's a holy number, and it goes beyond the expected, it's like going the extra mile, giving your cloak as well, that sort of thing.

Surely, we imagine Peter thinking, Jesus will like this answer. Surely this shows Peter's strength of leadership, holy insight, generosity of spirit. Surely, this is an impressive demonstration of all that Peter has learned from the great teacher, the Messiah of Israel.

But Jesus disappoints Peter. "No not seven times, but seventy times seven"

Nice try, Peter. You're edging in the right direction, but you've a long way to go yet. Seventy times seven equals four hundred ninety. An impossible number.

Completely unthinkable. Jesus uses an absurd exaggeration. What it means is this: forgive your brothers and sisters beyond your ability to keep track. If you are keeping track, it is not really forgiveness at all, you're just waiting for them to cross the line and then vengeance is all yours.

Jesus essentially says to Peter and to us, if you're keeping count, you're not really forgiving.

Then, to reinforce all this, Jesus tells a parable. Again, full of amazing exaggeration. The servant owes millions of dollars to the king, an inconceivable amount of money. But in this story, that is what this king is willing to loan and also to forgive. When the servant then fails to forgive another for a remarkably small debt, his forgiveness is withdrawn, and the king has him thrown into jail. Again, Jesus uses exaggeration to teach Peter, and us about the true nature of forgiveness.

But there is a great irony in all of this. Peter heard exaggeration in Jesus' answers, but he could not know that ultimately, this inconceivable amount was the size of debt that Jesus would soon forgive. All the sins, in all the world, throughout all of time. An incredibly, unbelievably large amount of debt.

On the cross, Jesus, the Messiah, Son of God, King of all creation, would give his own life, spill his own blood, so that the immeasurable debt of our sin would be erased.

The lesson for Peter and the lesson for us is the same, forgive without calculation or reservation. Every time you forgive someone, you pass on a drop of water out of that great bucketful of forgiveness that God has already given you and you pass it on to someone else.

Forgiveness is easy enough to say, but sometimes it can be incredibly hard to put in practice. God can help though, and God wants to help. God knows far better than we do, what happens when we

let bitterness and anger and hatred take root in our hearts and our minds. They become deadly poison for us, eating away at our thoughts and emotions, distorting us, imprisoning us, and keeping us from being the true people that God wants us to be.

This is one reason why it's important to forgive those who have hurt us—even if they deny it or refuse to accept our forgiveness. We may not be able to do anything about their attitude, but we can do something about ours, and it's so important for us to do so. The Bible says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger. ... Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:31-32).

How can we overcome our feelings of hurt and bitterness, how can we truly forgive those who have hurt us? The key is to remember what Christ has done for us. We don't deserve God's forgiveness; we have all sinned, we have all repeatedly turned away from Him. And yet Jesus Christ still gave His life for us on the cross, and now in His mercy, God offers for us the free gift of forgiveness and a new life to move on into.

So, accept Christ's gift of forgiveness for you today and then ask for him to help you to forgive others, just as he has forgiven you. Amen.

Jamie Milliken
13th September 2020