**September 17th**

**Reflection**

So forgiveness.

Another one of those topics about which whole libraries have been written. And yet, it’s still a tricky one, even though we have so much information available, even though so much thought has been put into it.

Obviously we are not the only ones who want more information about forgiveness; here peter is asking Jesus a clarifying question: just how many times should I have to forgive someone.

Is it 7 times? That seems enough, no?

And Jesus’ response is no, 77 times. Now as you may suspect and have likely heard before this isn’t Jesus legitimately answering with the specific number of times you forgive, he is meeting Peter where he is, in a place where forgiveness is a finite resource that can be counted and saying no, if you’re going to start counting, you’ll be counting for a long time. Jesus is saying essentially, you might think there is a limit but there is no limit.

As I’ve said, this is all very familiar to us.

But let’s take a moment to realise how heavy this answer is, the burden it might be to some.

If someone wrongs you and they are forgiven and then they wrong you again and are forgiven again, and then that repeats even just up to 7 times, that is still a lot of times. There are loud voices today who would say that the person who is wronging you continuously should be cut off, should be done with because they have proven themselves unworthy of your time and relationship, let alone your forgiveness.

And they are right. These days we have some understanding of unhealthy relationship dynamics, some strong opinions about how to take care of ourselves, some understanding of how unhealthy it can be to sacrifice our own state of mind, care, or safety for someone who does not treat us well.

The person who has been badly treated or abused could be themselves forgiven for not wanting to hear that the Christian thing to do is to continue to forgive into perpetuity.

And we in the church have made the mistake of being a part of situations of abuse and making them worse, making ourselves a part of that abuse by instructing victims that they need to simply forgive those who hurt them.

When in fact I would say the way this verse, this understanding of forgiveness has been applied is a huge misstep.

The first thing to say is that this passage follows another, that should perhaps be read in concert with it.

In this passage Jesus is already being grilled about the correct procedure for settling arguments in communities of faith.

So this question for a start is not asked about general forgiveness, but about the forgiveness one must offer to the sibling in Christ who has hurt or wronged you.

The second thing to say is that forgiveness doesn’t necessarily equal a totally healed relationship. If someone has wronged you again and again and you have forgiven them likewise, you may still want to forgive while also saying I am going to remove myself from your company, because you can’t be trusted. Is this still forgiveness? Well, I think so possibly. I think it perhaps depends on the inner workings of the one doing the forgiving.

The story Jesus tells about the king and the slaves is a larger-than-life tale. It is meant to be out of all proportion. The slave who owes the king money owes more than they will earn in their lifetime which begs the question how did they come to owe this? how does he expect to pay it off? And the king being moved by a simple plea for mercy to forgive the equivalent of many millions of dollars? Seems unlikely.

Even more than this the slave’s response after receiving such heady grace being to find someone who in contrast owes them a paltry sum, and to grab them about the neck and demand it back, is shocking and unbelievable. Who does he think he is?

But there we get to the point of the story- or one of the points perhaps.

This man was grateful no doubt to receive such a gift from the king. But having been forgiven so much, this gift, this grace didn’t penetrate beneath the surface. This man is unchanged inside himself by the bounty of his King’s gift and this is the real problem. His greed, or perhaps simply his understanding of what is right and just, however that has been formed, is still foremost in his mind, and not the ringing echo of the gift he has been given.

The other point of the story though, is clearly the unnatural, unreasonable, large scale forgiveness of the king.

We perhaps aren’t capable of this kind of generosity because we are still so fallible, but the forgiveness -the mercy, because that is what we’re talking about- of God is unnatural. It’s unreasonable. It’s absurd. It’s outsized. It’s shocking and scandalous. And maybe that’s not always in our wheelhouse. What we can hope for though, and try for, is to be the kind of slave who turns away and is so thoroughly shaken by what we have been given, that we can try to do the same for others, even if it’s patchy.

We may not like to think about the last part of the story, I certainly don’t. the once merciful king, on hearing what has unfolded, is done with generosity and casts the first slave into torment- indeed into a worse punishment than what he would have received earlier- and we are told that that is what will happen to us if we don’t keep on forgiving!

Rough.

To me, the notion of a god who is that generous and that full of mercy suddenly deciding they’ve had enough and we are done being forgiven doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t stand up.

What if our “punishment” for not forgiving, is the life we live when we don’t? what if our torment is letting this thing latch onto us, making us into people who carry our abuser, our opponent our enemy with us everywhere we go, turning our lives into twisted things that are shaped by that thing that was done to us that we cannot let go.

Nadia bolz weber talks about forgiveness being something that we can do to extricate ourselves from the ongoing affects of the wrongdoing we are forgiving. What you did was so not okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.’?

What she is getting at, and a lot of people say this, that we can forgive but not forget, or we can forgive and not restore relationship. And again I think this is true. And certainly safest in some circumstances.

But I do wonder if forgiveness, the forgiveness of a merciful Christ who while strung up on a tree forgave his killers, should cost us something.

I wonder if we can receive grace upon grace, mercy upon mercy and not be changed to people who are willing to set aside what they think might be just in some circumstances, to offer grace freely to another, no matter how much they think might be owed.

Are you all familiar with the story of Les Mis?

Jean Valjean is shown kindness by a man of the cloth. He repays this kindness by stealing from the church, some silver candlesticks. When later he is hauled back to the church by the police to answer for his crime, the priest says no I gave him those- and here you forgot to take the silverware also. This mercy is unbidden, unnecessary on the part of the priest, who had every right to demand satisfaction, and certainly shocking. And it changes Jean ValJean forever. He is affected by this act of unwarranted grace and it turns his life around. The priest had known mercy too I suspect.

I keep thinking about the phrase “to show mercy”, and about how perhaps that means a teaching as well as a giving. A demonstrating mercy so that the receiver, who has been handed it, will know what to do with it.

In the passage preceding our reading today, when Jesus is talking about how to sort out arguments in a community of faith, there is real structure and culpability there for those who have done wrong. There are real consequences. This is not about no one taking into account the mistakes they’ve made, or simply letting people off the hook. This is about forgiveness in a community where communication should be open and people should be confronted in love when they have made a mistake.

Debie Thomas in the blog Journey with Jesus has this to say:

The same Bible that calls us to forgive also calls us to mourn, to lament, to speak truth to power, and to hunger and thirst for righteousness.  Forgiveness in the Christian tradition isn't a palliative; it works hand-in-hand with the arduous work of repentance and transformation.  In other words, there is nothing godly about responding to systemic evil with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity.  As theologian and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns us, we must never allow forgiveness to degenerate into "cheap grace."  That is, "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession… grace without the Cross."

So no, forgiveness isn’t easy. And I would certainly never stand here and tell you all that it is and that you must simply make peace with everyone who has wronged you no matter what they have done, but I do want to say that I also think forgiveness can’t just be about saving ourselves, about separating ourselves from what someone has done and saying ‘that has no power to affect me any more’. Though I do think this is huge and important work, and sometimes perhaps it’s all we can do.

But let us remember that Jesus’ mercy isn’t calm and rational. It’s outsized. It’s irrational.

Our forgiveness, in this wonderful community here, might cost us. Our forgiveness is part of our community. It is a communal, life giving thing. It’s a part of the DNA of us, of who we are both individually and more importantly, all together.

We have been given much, the candlesticks and the silverware.

What will we let it cost us when we meet someone who has hurt us?