

Restoration and Recovery

It isn't too often that all of the readings deal with the same theme. Most times, the first reading from the Old Testament and the Gospel will have a similar theme and the Psalm will also reflect that theme. The second reading is usually one of the letters of the New Testament and is often a semi-continuous reading of that letter. For today's readings, the central theme may be a little obscure at first, but hopefully, by the end of this sermon, you will see the connection with the other texts. This theme central to today's readings is one of forgiveness and restoration to the community.

The Gospel reading is a continuation from last week's text where, at first glance, Jesus gives us a procedure of how to deal with those who sin against us. But instead of a procedure of how to get rid of 'problem' members, we saw that Jesus 'flips' it so that we still work on restoring those members to our community. In today's text, Peter picks up on this. He seems to understand that Jesus is talking about relationships and not policy. But he reverts back to how he knows society works - by asking how many times to forgive. This is consistent with Jewish teachings current at that time. The Pharisees had decreed that forgiveness was to be extended seven times. But Jesus continues the flip on teaching about forgiveness, being consistent with how He rarely accepts the status quo. Jesus pushes that number of times to forgive to a rather absurd level. You may have heard this translated as 70 X 7 times or 77 times. Either way, it's rather unrealistic. Can you imagine trying to keep track of every time someone 'sinned' against you? Does each type of sin count separately or do all sins by one person count consecutively? Imagine the ledger that you would have to keep in order to keep track of everyone's sins against you.

By using such an absurdly high number, Jesus is trying to teach us another lesson and He does this through the parable. The amount of debt that the master forgave the

unjust servant was astronomical. Depending on how you calculate it, the debt could be as much as 10,000 years wages, while the debt this unjust servant wouldn't forgive was only a few days wages. The key, I think, is actually in the last verse, about forgiving from one's heart. Forgiving, especially forgiving from the heart, is actually something that we need to practice. So, when Jesus says we must forgive 70 X 7 times, it doesn't mean to track of the number of times we forgive, but to practice forgiving. When we forgive, we usually start with something like "I'll forgive you, but I won't forget" and wait for the person to commit the offense again before we get back at them. What Jesus is saying is that we need to keep forgiving until we truly forgive from our heart.

When we compare the forgiveness which we receive from God to the forgiveness which we extend to others, there is no comparison. God has forgiven us of a debt that we could never be able to repay. If we can be forgiven of such a huge amount, shouldn't we be able to forgive a much smaller amount that is owed to us, an amount that can be repaid? An analogy would be if someone paid off all our debts, our house, our cars, everything that we owed and gave us an additional \$100,000 yet if a friend had borrowed \$20 would we still expect them to pay it back?

Jesus knows that forgiveness is a pathway back to restoration to the community. When there is no forgiveness, either given or accepted, then the person becomes isolated from the community. Consider this true story:

When Chris was 10 years old, he was abducted, stabbed, shot in the head, and left for dead. Surprisingly, he survived, but the emotional and physical scars were very difficult to heal. Eventually, though, his commitment to Christ helped him to move on with his life. Unfortunately, the perpetrator was never found. More than 20 years later he received a phone call from the Coral Gables, FL police department. The detective said that an elderly man in a local nursing home had confessed to being his abductor. The man's name was David McCallister. Chris visited David the following day.

Here are Chris' words: "It was an awkward moment, walking into his room, but as soon as I saw him, I was overwhelmed with compassion. The man I found was not an intimidating kidnapper, but a frail seventy-seven-year-old who had been blind for the last half-dozen years. David's body was ruined by alcoholism and smoking - he weighed little more than sixty pounds. He had no family, or if he did, they wanted nothing to do with him, and no friends. A friend who had accompanied me wisely asked him a few simple questions that led to him admitting that he had abducted me. He then asked David, 'Did you ever wish you could tell that young boy that you were sorry for what you did?' David answered emphatically, 'I wish I could.' That was when I introduced myself to him. Unable to see, David clasped my hand and told me he was sorry for what he had done to me. As he did, I looked down at him, and it came over me like a wave: Why should anyone have to face death without family, friends, the joy of life - without hope? I couldn't do anything but offer him my forgiveness and friendship." In the days that followed, Chris was able to share the love of Christ with David. [Source: J. Arnold, 'Why Forgive?']

Even though David was a suspect from the beginning, he could not be charged for lack of being identified by Chris as being the attacker. In a way, by Chris forgiving him, David was restored to the community and he was able to find the peace in his final weeks that eluded him for so many years.

I had mentioned earlier that the text from Romans was connected to this theme of forgiveness and restoration to the community of faith. In the text from Paul, he makes the argument that as long as what we do is for Christ, then it doesn't really matter what we do, that we are not to judge one another by our standards. It is in judging others that we find ways to exclude people from our community. Paul is telling us that we are to leave the judging up to God, who is the master of us slaves. In the

part where Paul says that no one lives to themselves, he is making the point that we live in relationship - relationship with each other and with God.

In this Gospel reading, Jesus is calling us, as Christians, to be in a relationship of inclusion, not exclusion with each other. This is very different from how the world operates - as we can observe in today's social environments. There is a definite feeling of an 'us vs. them' attitude and if you are one of 'them' then you cannot be in our circle. Not only that, but anyone who is a 'them' is not only on the outside, but is also the 'enemy.' Anyone who espouses this kind of attitude is not following Jesus and we would do well to think twice about endorsing that kind of attitude ourselves.

The Good News of these texts is that Jesus sees that we have a need to be in relationship and that there will be times when those relationships are strained; so Jesus gives us a way to have those relationships restored so that no one is excluded from the community of faith.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/4wS54uGZA68>

Service: