

PENTECOST XVIII

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.

Romans 14:2

Well, I'm actually not going to preach about the limitations of veganism. Nor am I going to preach on the topic I saw advertised for this week on the placard at the First Unitarian Church: *Deer Hunting with Jesus*.

No, I'm going to preach on the Gospel, on Jesus' hard saying, *(Forgive) not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy seven times*. Matthew 18:22

I touched on forgiveness, of course, in my homily last week, not having read ahead to today's Gospel. Afterwards, someone said to me, "Good sermon. It's a timeless topic – forgiveness, moving on, healing. You can never say too much about it. "

So, forgiveness. The bible tells us over and over that we ought to forgive those who have hurt or injured us. We know it. We say so every Sunday in the Lord's Prayer. We remember the stories from Hebrew Scripture about God forgiving and sparing humankind repeatedly. We hear parables such as the one Jesus tells today, which seems to demand that if we are to expect forgiveness from God, we must demonstrate our own capacity for forgiveness at least seventy times.

I notice, by the way, that the New Revised Standard Version tells us *seventy* times. I grew up with the understanding that the demand was that we forgive *seventy times seven*, or 490 times. Apparently there are variant readings; but the most recent translators have opted the lower rate. Are we slacking off?

But you know, what about the 490 requirement? Do any of us really imagine that we haven't committed that number of acts of forgiveness in our lifetime? We may not have forgiven a single person 490 times, but if we are married we undoubtedly have. If we have parents (and we all do, or did) we have forgiven them that often, as they have forgiven us. And if we have children, we are working up to that number, and may have surpassed it, depending on how old those children are. And we may not, to adhere strictly to the question from Scripture, forgiven a particular member of the church 490 times, but if we add up every irritating or hurtful transaction we've ever had with a fellow parishioner, we might be getting close!

So perhaps even the higher number is not so impossibly daunting. We can do it! We can do what Jesus says.

I ‘ve played the numbers game a bit here because I think that if a Gospel imperative seems too harsh, too demanding, we are tempted to ignore it, to dismiss it, or to give up on ourselves, in a way, because we know we can never live up to such rigorous standards. But when we stop to think about *most* of the acts of forgiveness we may be asked to perform, they are well within our capacity.

But I don’t want to trivialize the challenges of forgiveness at a deeper level. Because when we have been, or when we feel, deeply, truly, gravely, injured, forgiveness can be almost overwhelmingly difficult. And I am by no means someone who has perfected the art of forgiveness, not at all. But I’ll tell you a bit of what I have learned, and what I believe.

For one thing, I believe in the fundamental goodness and good intentions of most people. I am theologically committed to that belief, because I believe that we are children of God, created in the image and likeness of God. And if God is good, then, in God’s likeness, we must also be good at heart.

Many people are committed to another kind of theology: one that emphasizes our fallenness, that focuses on sin and evil, on the snake and the fruit of the poisoned tree of knowledge and all that. That’s a theology that leads to harsh judgment, gloom, and often, I think, to paranoia and conspiracy theories. But it’s not my theology and I don’t think it prevails among us here at St John’s.

So, if we are disposed to believe that most people are fundamentally good, and are striving to be good and to do right, a corollary is that most of the slings and arrows we receive, and have to find it in ourselves to forgive – most of these hurts are unintentional. We upset one another without meaning to, often completely unaware of sensitivities we may be wounding. Or we speak or act carelessly, hastily, mindlessly, and we inadvertently wound or offend one another.

How often have we been told by someone that we have hurt or angered them when really, truly, we had no idea we’d done so, we didn’t mean to, and we’d give anything to dial back time and undo our inadvertent behavior? Well, the process works both ways. If we know that most of our interpersonal blunders are just that, blunders, and not acts of malice or what Iago calls *motiveless malignancy*, then we have to give others the benefit of the doubt, and believe that they are equally ignorant of their *faux pas*.

But embedded in that reasoning is an assumption that last week’s Gospel addresses, when Jesus says, *If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have*

regained that one. That is, when someone has hurt or offended you, and you can't dismiss what's happened as simple oversight or thoughtlessness, you need to tell that person, if you expect the behavior not to continue. None of us are mind readers. And if we hurt others unintentionally, we're not going to know that unless we're told, and there's little hope that our behavior's going to modify unless we know what we've done.

This seems to me to be rudimentary common sense. But it is all too rarely followed. People don't like confrontation or conflict, they fear reprisals if they speak up; if hurt or offense happen in a work situation, we often worry about power differentials, and so forth. All this is true, and real. But if we cannot find ways to address our grievances with those who have wounded or angered us, we are evading a certain responsibility, we are choosing, on some level, to remain aggrieved, to keep on picking the scabs of injury, to remain, in some sense, in the status of victims.

And when I speak of victims, I move to the most grave questions of sin and forgiveness: situations where we have been the subject of real abuse, crime, or intentional evil. Most of what I have learned and believe about this profound level of wounding comes from my work with victims of sexual abuse, and my experience as such a victim myself. But there are other kinds of abuse – emotional, psychological, physical – which are just as deeply damaging and to which, I believe, the same principles apply.

The movement that deals with survivors of abuse and their recovery has two major schools of thought about forgiveness, as I understand it. One is this: *Never speak of forgiveness until justice has been done.* This line of thinking requires that survivors, or their representatives, (lawyers for example) confront their accusers, demand sincere apologies and reparations –whatever that might mean – and see signs of genuine sorrow and changed behavior on the part of perpetrators before forgiveness enters the picture. In other words, forgiveness has to be earned.

And there is some sense in which these principles operate in less serious situations as well. If somebody has injured us, and we believe the hurt was purposeful, and we want to move forward in our relationship with that person, we can rightfully go to them, as Jesus suggests, explain the problem and our feelings, and hope for an apology. And you know what, apologies are really easy to make if we have hurt someone by mistake! This is a lesson I've learned with age – not to be defensive without reason. If I've inadvertently injured or angered someone, and they let me know, saying I'm sorry is the easiest thing in the world.

But if we explain our feelings as calmly and reasonably as possible, and if we have a legitimate grievance, and if the offender refuses to take responsibility or apologize or try to make amends or vow to change behavior, then we have another set of challenges. Moreover, if someone apologizes to us and then continues to engage in the behavior that has been problematic, we have those challenges. Repentance, as I have often said, does not mean simply saying you're sorry. Saying you're sorry may – or may not– be the easiest thing in the world, but if it not backed up by genuine attempts not to recommit your offense, an apology isn't worth much.

So, the other school of thought about forgiveness does not depend so much on the attitude or behavior of the perpetrators of harm or abuse. It has to do with peace in our own souls. This approach – and I believe in it– tells us that in most truly grievous cases of injury, the capacity to forgive is far more important for the victim or survivor of abuse than it is for the perpetrator.

Think of the most egregious examples that have been newsworthy in recent years – the endemic clergy sexual abuse perpetrated in the Roman Catholic Church. How many of the accused priests have we heard asking for forgiveness and promising to change their ways? And how many survivors of those priests' crimes have we seen agonizing decades later, still hurting, still angry, still desperately seeking justice and recompense.

Please hear me: I don't blame those survivors. They have every right to their rage, their pain, and their passion for justice. But I feel sad when they seem stuck in their status as victims, unable, apparently, to move on or beyond the events of so many years ago.

And I suspect that what distinguishes those who are able to move on from those who are not concerns perhaps not so much their inability to forgive their perpetrators as their inability to forgive themselves. One of the cruelest aspects of abuse is the sense of so many survivors that they have collaborated, somehow in their own victimization.

Cruel, but it is also a reflection of our human life together. Most of us are not hermits. We live in relationship – that's where we find comfort and sustenance and hope and joy. That's also where we find injury, anger, and grievance. All these emotions, and so many more, are woven together in the rich tapestry of our human connectedness, our human community. We live with that awareness, with its joys and with its sorrows. One of those sorrows, for victims of abuse, is the irrational conviction that they – that we- are somehow responsible for the wrongs done to us. Our task and our challenge is to overcome that erroneous belief, and also to forgive ourselves for – if we need to – our

inability to forgive those who have damaged us, and to do our best to live abundant and fruitful lives

We are all made, I believe, in the image of God, but that image is flawed and imperfect. As children of God and followers of Jesus we are called to be turning always toward the light. We are called always to be forgiving one another – and ourselves – for things done and left undone. And we are called to remember that in God’s realm forgiveness is not so much earned as given; forgiveness is a gift, a grace.

Not an easy call, as I said at the outset. But we have as our inspiration the good king of today’s Gospel, who forgives all, even as the God of love forgives, again and again, infinitely more times than our mathematics can calculate, or our hearts imagine.

Alleluia! Amen