

Pentecost 15 / Proper 19 (A) - Seventy Seven Times

Where are we in Matthew's Gospel

- In today's gospel lesson from Matthew we find ourselves with Jesus and the Disciples on the Road to Jerusalem
 - It was a journey that started in the 16th Chapt of Matthew, in the far north of Galilee, at the outskirts of Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus asked the fundamental question of the Gospel, "Who do you say I am?"
 - and where Jesus explained to the disciples that he "must go to Jerusalem to suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests and the scribes."
 - Now on the road to Jerusalem, (and in the following two chapters of Matthew) most of the words of Jesus are directed to his disciples, as he explains what it means to follow a crucified Messiah.
 - In today's reading we find Jesus and the disciples at the southern border of Galilee, just before crossing the Jordan, to take the roundabout route to Jerusalem, bypassing Samaria
 - And here in the 18th Chapter Matthew, Jesus teaches his disciples about the what it means to be church .
 - He doesn't talk about church structures and budgets. The talk is about relationships;
 - about how to respond to the lost sheep—those who drift away from the community—
 - and about how to settle disputes,
 - about how the leaders must think of themselves as servants,
 - and about forgiveness.

Forgiveness

- The question about forgiveness was raised by Peter, when he asks, If another member of the church sins against me, how many times should I forgive? As many as seven times?

- Seven times is already more than required, but Jesus says, essentially, that there should be no limit to the number of times we forgive.
 - “Not 7 times, he says, “But I tell you, 77 times.”
 - This 77 times is a reference to the story of Lamech in the Book of Genesis.
 - Lamech was the great-great-great grandson of Cain. He gathered his wives one day and said, ,
“I have killed a man for wounding me..and as God promised Cain that if Cain were killed , his death would avenged 7 times, then my death will be avenged 77 times.”
 - Which just goes to show that the violence that began with Cain continued with his descendants, and actually increased.
 - Jesus turns that 77 times that vengeance will be dished out into 77 times that forgiveness must be granted
- Then Jesus talks about how this world, which is centered in violence and revenge is different from the world as it should be, the world that Jesus envisioned as part of the Kingdom of Heaven, the world in which God’s will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.
 - Jesus describes the Kingdom of Heaven with a parable: the parable of the Unforgiving Servant.
- Here we have a slave who owes his King 10,000 talents.
 - 10,000 talents! It’s a number that goes beyond imagining.
 - The historian Josephus tells us that the entire budget for the province of Judea for a year was 600 talents.
 - The slave who owed this 10,000 talents begged the King to have a little patience to allow the slave time to repay the debt;
 - The King knew and we know that it would take years of patience by the king to enable the slave put together the equivalent of 16 years of the Judaeen budget
 - But instead... the King generously forgave the entire debt.
- At the same time this Ungrateful Slave held a note for 100 denarii (which was just about 100 days wages, a debt that was in the realm of the payable over time.)

- But the ungrateful slave demanded that the debt be repaid in full, and threw his fellow slave in prison until he could repay the debt.
- At which point the King stepped in and made all things right.

Lessons

- At a very surface level this story reflects that statement in the Lord's Prayer, "...forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us (or as the KJV of Matthew has it: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.")
 - But this, in my understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven, is too transactional (if you do this then I'll do that; if you scratch my back, or if I do this for you, I may call upon you to do a favor= etc. etc)
- But God, like the King in *this* parable is not a transactional God
 - God has compassion on human failings, and like the King in the parable, God has no sense of proportion; God acts more graciously than *we* could ever *expect* or imagine.
 - Thus, in turn, those who have experienced such a great measure of forgiveness from God should not put limits on their reconciliation with others.
 - And *that* is the radical message that Jesus gave to Peter.
 - It is similar to the message Jesus gave about love of enemies in the Sermon on the Mount.
 - It is the same message that Jesus gave to his executioners as he was being nailed to the cross.
 - It is the same message that the the first Christian martyr St. Stephen gave to those who were stoning him to death.
- Radical forgiveness:
 - that is the message that Jesus repeats over and over again
 - that is what God expects from us; this is how God expects us to live out our lives in the Kingdom of God.
 - Jesus says at the end of the parable that "we must forgive our brothers and sisters from our heart."

- That may not be entirely self-explanatory. ..
- But to me it means that forgiveness is not a matter of mathematics or of an exchange in kind.
- The King forgave all the Slave's debt, all 10,000 talents of debt.
 - And what was the King's expectation?
 - The King wanted more than some cheap transactional relationship.
 - I believe that King expected that
 - when the slave experienced such forgiveness,
 - when the slave was given such immense grace,
 - then the king expected the slave to turn his life around, to be transformed in gratitude.
 - The king's expectation: Grace should beget grace, forgiveness should provoke forgiveness.
 - And that is God's expectation: If God's grace has affected our lives, then from that point on, we should live in a different way in our relationship to others
 - We should be transformed, transformed "in the heart."
- In today's world, we often read in the newspapers or online or hear about this "transformation in the heart," ...about remarkable acts of forgiveness:
 - During the trial of the shooter at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, shooting survivors and relatives of five of the victims spoke to the shooter directly, saying that they were "praying for his soul" and that they forgave him.
 - You probably recall the news of several years ago about an Amish Community that forgave a man who had murdered several of their community members.
- We are always touched by these stories of forgiveness
 - Perhaps its because they show us that we don't have to live brutish lives like Lamech, seeking revenge 77 times over.
 - These stories show that some people truly understand what it means to live in the Kingdom of Heaven

Sunday, September 13, 2020

- These stories are one of the ways that God is speaking to me, to you and to all of us....to show us that living in the Kingdom of Heaven—today— is possible, even for us.
- So as we try to imagine the Kingdom of Heaven, we might take a few moments to pray about someone against whom we've held a grudge. Or maybe someone we're just angry about. Or perhaps we could ask God if we might have the courage to forgive ourselves for some of the damage we've caused others.
- The Robert Burns poem says, "o Wad some Power the Giftie gie us / To see ourselves as other see us"
- Perhaps instead we We should ask God to give us the grace to see ourselves and others as God sees us...a God who looks upon us with compassion and forgives us our sins.