

A Sunday Devotional for People and Families at Home
The First Church of Evans
Father's Day - Sunday, June 21, 2020

Greetings from Jerusalem Corners,

I have stopped counting weeks at the top of this week's At Home Order of Worship because we are no longer restricted from gathering on our campus on Sunday mornings to worship together. Pray that for our leaders that we can make a plan to worship together safely and wisely and soon in a manner that continues to include those whose health and/or circumstances will not allow them to join us. And don't forget to pray for fathers near and far as we worship the Father who forgave us and commands us to forgive others as well.

Call to Worship

Matthew 18:21,22

Then Peter came up to Jesus and said to him,

"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."

An Opening Prayer

Our Father and Savior,

There is no scale that can measure what it cost you to offer us your Son as the Lamb, the one sacrifice that could satisfy your justice, which was so deeply offended by the enormity of human sin. We are so grateful for Christ and for all he gave for us. Please forgive us that, after being forgiven ourselves at such great cost, we fail to forgive others the injuries we suffer at their hands. Please teach us to forgive and to love like you do; through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Devotional

Matthew 18:23-35

Elder and Personnel Chair, Gail Galfo

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, so that payment could be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything!' And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him saying, 'Pay what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me and I will pay you!' But he refused and went and put the man in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then the master summoned him and said, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the torturers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

In the Gospel of Matthew, there are five great discourses of Jesus; the Sermon on the Mount, the commissioning of the disciples, the parables of the kingdom, life in the church, and the end of the age. This morning, we find ourselves in Matthew 18, where Jesus is teaching his disciples about the life we share in the church. He begins with a discussion on who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, followed by the Parable of the Lost Sheep. That parable underscores the truth that even in God's eyes "*one of these little ones*" has such immense value that the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep, and goes after the one that had wandered off. Then, in verses 15 through 20, Jesus provides instruction to the church on how to deal with a brother who has sinned.

And it is Peter's response to these instructions that becomes our Call to Worship this morning: "*Then Peter came up to Jesus and said to him, 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.'"* Interestingly, Jewish tradition limited forgiveness to three times, citing passages like Amos 1:3,6,9 and Job 33:29,30. So Peter likely thought his willingness to forgive seven times was much more generous than Jewish tradition, and was better than the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. The phrase "*seventy-seven times*" would have meant "unlimited" to the Jewish mind.

And Jesus went on to tell the parable of the servant who owed his master much, but the master, hearing the servant's pleas, cancelled the debt. However, when the servant went to one who owed him a debt, he refused to forgive the debt and instead had the man imprisoned. Upon hearing this, the master had the servant brought before him and had him tortured and imprisoned until he could repay the debt he owed the master. Jesus is our master, and we are his servants. Therefore, there is no question that Christ wants us to forgive others as many times as it takes.

How difficult this is at times, especially when there are those who torment us time and time again with their lies, unfaithfulness and unwavering deceit. We ask ourselves when "enough is enough". And Jesus tells us - NEVER!

It is never enough, and one must forgive, and forgive, and forgive, and forgive. This becomes more difficult when we find ourselves unable to forget a wrong, and one wrong compounds on another and another. You can forgive, even if you can't forget.

However, not being able to forget is also a learning experience because it teaches us how not to act. Remember the Golden Rule we all learned as children - treat others as you would like to be treated? Being hurt, discouraged and frustrated teaches us how not to behave in such a manner that would make others feel as we do. Vengeance is not an option! Only forgiveness is. Just remember that those who hurt you are likely lost, like sheep who wander. It's up to us to forgive, so as to bring them into the flock.

Why are we angered at the conduct of this unjust servant, and rejoice at the decision of the king to revoke the forgiveness he gave? If the king from the parable stands in for the Father, would the Father condemn a person to eternal torture? If we're expected to repeatedly forgive, why didn't God? These are troubling questions, but I think Jesus told this parable to get us to examine our own hearts and to repent of our harsh judgment against others.

Jesus tells us in the last verse of this parable that what the master did to the unforgiving servant is what "*my heavenly Father will do to you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*" In this crazy world of a pandemic, violent and non-violent protests, and the inability of so many of us to look past one's skin color to see the goodness within, we need to remember the words Jesus taught us when he told us to pray "*...forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*"

Offering

Proverbs 3:9,10

*Honor the LORD from your wealth and from the first of all your produce,
then will your barns be filled with plenty, and your vats overflowing with new wine.*

Thank you for the faithfulness you have shown Christ and his kingdom during this season. Please mail what your heart leads you to give to: The First Church of Evans, Attn: Cindy Fanara, P.O. Box 364, Derby, NY, 14047.

(What follows is the script for the worship video we will offer this week via a link on our website:

TheFirstChurchofEvans.com. If you cannot access the video, you can still join us by reading and praying and singing through the printed Order of Worship that follows.)

Greeting and Prayer

Hymn

"God of Grace and God of Glory"

See Insert

Table Talk

Romans 12:14-21

Pastor Stephen Ridge

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.
Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.
Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil,
but give thought to what is honorable in the sight of all.
If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God,
for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord."*

In his travels, the Apostle Paul once found himself alone and engulfed in a strange Greek city, Corinth. And he might have faced a long, lonely season, trying to explain Israel's Messiah in neighborhoods full of resolute, decadent pagans, unaccustomed to thinking in terms of a single, true God, never mind a Savior who was a working man, a Savior who somehow dies to spare us all a judgment that they had never heard of, and well...so on.

But as it turned out Paul didn't wind up alone. He found work and lodging in a tent factory outlet run by a Jewish couple named Aquila and Priscilla, who were probably Christians, who, the Bible tells us, had been kicked out of the city of Rome by the Emperor Claudius because the whole Jewish quarter of that city had exploded into rioting, we think, because teaching about Christ had fractured the Jewish community there. At least that's what the Roman historian Suetonius hints at in his account of Claudius' reign.

And I tell you all this, because the words I've just read to you were written by Paul to believers in Rome, living through the aftermath of a long season of ethnic conflict. Which mattered, because the church in Rome was made up of believers from everywhere, Greeks and Romans and no small number of Jews, trying to build a common life when a few short years before their relatives and neighbors had been throwing paving stones and torches into one another's shops and homes.

So believers' hearts and sometimes their bones had been broken by people not too different from the believers they were sitting with in Sunday worship, and breaking bread and handling God's word, and trying to make nice. And what Paul is teaching here is that nice starts in the heart. That we should look at people on the "wrong" side of the divide and "*bless*" them, Paul says. Ask God to show mercy to people who might show us none. What we say to God about people either opens or closes our hearts to them. Bless someone, pray for them and you begin to see them as something other than "them".

He goes on: *"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."* So Paul urges the not-so-simple art of seeing life from the viewpoint of the person looking at you, trying to understand what lifts and breaks his heart. You don't have to agree with someone to acknowledge his grief, or to want and wish him well. *"Live in harmony with one another,"* our text says. The Greek literally says something like *"Engage one another's minds."* In other words, share an idea in a way that allows others to share an idea.

"Don't be haughty, but engage with the lowly" Paul writes. There is this human tendency to think that my culture, the things that I didn't need to be told are what's right, what's noble and lofty. And there is something to be said for manners, for respect, for decorum. So long as we remember that custom isn't character, culture isn't nobility, tidy isn't always holy and proper isn't always right. Propriety must serve and promote kindness to be anything like right.

"Repay no one evil for evil," Paul writes, *"but give thought to what is honorable to all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."* So much of making heart to heart connections with people involves learning to think and care about what they think and feel, trying to conduct ourselves in ways that other people can understand and appreciate. What's right is always right, what's kind is always kind, but how that gets communicated can really vary depending on where you are and who you're with.

Finally, Paul closes with that troublesome prospect, judgment: *"Beloved,"* Paul writes, *"never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."* The fact is that there is evil that must and will be condemned. Paul will write in the very next paragraph after this one that God himself ordained and armed the civil authorities to exert enough retribution so that the worst impulses of the wicked are kept in check. But beyond that there is a judgment waiting that belongs to God alone that will right the wrongs that human authority can't stop and can't reach, secret wrongs that tear peoples' lives apart, private, personal wrongs that arrogant souls thought no one would see and those great public injustices that the rich and mighty won't address.

And Jesus taught that fallen men and women should never presume to execute that kind of final, irrevocable judgment. To receive forgiveness ourselves is to understand that we are no better than the people who need our forgiveness. It is the gospel the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 wouldn't learn and that is what cost him his soul.

Prayer *Matthew 7:7* *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you."*

Please keep the governing authorities in prayer that they make wise decisions in response to the pandemic and to the recent racial conflict and civil unrest. Please keep our medical people and other first line public servants and their families in prayer as they selflessly face danger to save the lives of sick and vulnerable people. Please remember our elderly loved ones who are at home or in care facilities. Please especially remember those people and families who have lost loved ones during the pandemic. Please also pray for Jean Hill and Richard Pearson in the hospital and Eric DePan and Jerry Galfo as they recover at home from surgery. And don't forget to pray for dads everywhere!

Hymn

"Here I Am, Lord"

See Insert

An Ancient Benediction

Numbers 6:24-26

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the LORD lift his countenance upon you and give you his peace." We hope to see you soon, and very soon. Until then...