

Year A – 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – 17 September 2017  
Matthew 18:21-35

Last week I spoke to you about the need for all of us – each and every one of us – to find ways to remain in relationship with one another, especially during times of disagreement. We were reminded in the Gospel that when two or three are gathered, Jesus Christ is in their midst. We were also given that strong juxtaposition of messages that spoke of how to deal with contention using just a few people and then, on the opposite side, the promise that when two or more people agree upon something in God's name, God will fulfil that intention.

While these are, of course, important for us to understand as we walk toward, and invite others to walk with us toward, our fulfilment of faith as we eventually join with Christ in the heavenly realm, it isn't just about the end-game that we are taught these lessons. Everything we are taught in the gospels is important for the fulfilment of our faith journey. However, God has not asked us to live so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good! We aren't there yet and God still has work for us to do in this earthly realm before we are ready for the heavenly one.

So, what is the Gospel all about, beyond the salvation of our souls and the promise of being with God in heaven? I think, and I believe, that the gospels were intended to be as much a guidebook or a training manual for how we live in this life as much as they are one for how we get to the other. After all, while Jesus spent a lot of time talking about the times that were to come, he spent most of his time teaching people how to live in the times that were already at hand.

Relationships are a very large part, if not really the complete message of Jesus Christ. Everything that he said and did pertained in some way to the idea that relationships are to be nurtured, encouraged and used to the betterment of the kingdom. Over and over again, Jesus spoke of people's relationship to God, even if that was through the Law. When he healed people in body and mind, he wanted them to give thanks and grow closer to God. Even those parables and lessons that spoke about conflict, lead us to reflect on the nature of the relationships involved. To know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour means knowing him in a personal relationship. And being in relationship with Christ automatically means that we are also in relationship with one another – both other Christ-followers and those that haven't realized him in their lives yet. Everything in the Bible, everything in the gospels, is about relationship. That is a truth we cannot escape.

This morning our gospel speaks of the need for forgiveness and a parable is told that reminds us that forgiveness is a multi-faceted thing and not something so simple and straightforward that we can just "do it" and check it off our list. It is something that we do and it is also something that we have done unto us. It is not easy to do, nor is it always easy to receive. However, it is a pre-requisite for who we are as Christians in this world and who we will be as the saved in the heavenly world.

A secular definition of forgiveness "is the intentional and voluntary process by which a victim undergoes a change in feelings and attitude regarding an offense, lets go of negative emotions

such as vengefulness, with an increased ability to wish the offender well. Forgiveness is different from condoning, excusing, and forgetting.” (Wikipedia)

I think that the act of forgiving or asking for forgiveness has become quite commonplace. “Forgive me” seems, in many parts of our passing conversations, to have pre-empted the traditional “excuse me” or “pardon me”. The word “forgive” has become so frequently used that its meaning and depth have become lost in a meaningless play of words that remove it completely from what Jesus is speaking of in the gospel.

Forgiveness is not something that does, or should, come easily. Like the act of saying “I am sorry” there is an element of humility and depth that needs to be present when petitioning for or considering granting of forgiveness.

When my oldest stepson was young he had this habit of crying and saying, “I’m sorry” when he had done something wrong – intentionally or accidentally. As he got older he began to get quite perturbed when, instead of automatically saying that it was okay, we told him that we weren’t ready to forgive him, or more matter-of-factly when we told him that he wasn’t ready for forgiveness. You see, he learned early on that “I’m sorry” seemed to make everything okay for him. He didn’t understand yet that the words needed to be backed up with changed behaviour and honest contrition. When he was very young, we didn’t expect as much but as he got older we did expect the behaviour and the attitude to change. Simply saying the words “I’m sorry” were about as meaningful as the debtor who is forgiven but then goes and shows no mercy to those in debt to him. With the words of contrition must also come a heart of contrition.

Our world is one of instant and fast. You can pick up a gourmet meal on your way home from work. You can find the answer to that nagging question just by typing a few words into a Google search engine. Not often, it seems, are we expected to wait or to keep moving without having the answer to our question, the fix to our problem, immediately. With forgiveness, however, the waiting is part of the process.

Forgiveness can be as simple and as immediate as having your debts forgiven -but how often does that happen anymore? More often, when we speak of forgiveness in this world, and in particular, in the Church, we are not speaking about financial debts but rather of debts of the soul, rifts in relationships, trusts that have been broken and will take time to mend and heal. None of this is usually instantaneous. Sometimes God does work miracles and forgiveness can be given and received in the blink of an eye, but generally speaking, the act of forgiveness is an ongoing act that takes time, prayer and patience.

I am often told about situations and circumstances in which people struggle to offer forgiveness to another. Time and again I hear people state that the other person hasn’t yet “earned my forgiveness” or they haven’t changed their ways and they keep repeating that bad behaviour. It is so hard to forgive someone when you harbour resentment in your soul.

The truth is that forgiveness, just as it has been given to us by Jesus on the cross, cannot be preconditioned as something that will be offered if ... The one doing the forgiving has to dig deep into the heart to find that depth of care for the soul of the other that they will turn to Christ and ask for *his* ability to forgive – that is a forgiveness that comes out of a true love for the other and not out of a desire to determine that forgiveness has finally been earned. Truth be told, if

Christ demanded that we earn our forgiveness, none of us would be able to carry the load of our own guilt.

The act of forgiving is a process of the choice to love as Jesus loves. It takes time. It takes effort. It takes making a choice and following through on it.

The other part of forgiveness we need to touch on is that of being forgiven. If we think it is hard to forgive then we need to face the truth that being forgiven is actually even more difficult.

Accepting forgiveness is, in itself, an act of humility. For most people, receiving another's forgiveness can be the most difficult thing we can do because it means admitting that we have done wrong. It means allowing ourselves to come face to face with our mistakes, and even our dark intentions, and becoming aware of the damage we have done – big or small. It also means doing the hard work of recognizing that something must change in our lives and in our relationships, and then committing ourselves to doing that hard work.

Forgiveness is all about relationships and reconciliation, which is what Jesus shared with us in the gospels so very many times. Whether we are the forgiver or the forgiven, we have to pay attention to what is being said, what is being done, our part in how things are moving forward and being intentional that we hold the entire relationship with humility and grace.

If we are doing the forgiving, then we need to remember that the person we are trying to reconcile with is in a state in which grace is required and that means that we must approach them with Jesus in our hearts rather than ulterior motives or the desire to teach a lesson.

If we are the one being forgiven, or asking for forgiveness, we must carry the truth that the relationship we are trying to restore has been hurt and is in need of gentleness and care. We too must move forward with grace and Jesus in our hearts, praying that what has been broken can be healed in Christ's name, and indeed, in Christ's time.

Forgiveness is a gift given by God to all of us through His Son Jesus Christ: a gift that we have daily need of receiving ourselves. But it is also a gift that God is willing to teach us how to share with others as well. We have to remember though, whichever end of the forgiveness we are facing, that Jesus introduced forgiveness to us not as a selfish gift to make us feel better but rather as a gift that calls us into community; a gift that calls for reconciliation and healing and learning to walk together along the path to salvation – a salvation that God has provide for each and every person.