

“A Matter of Forgiveness”

“French author Victor Hugo has a short story titled, ‘93.’ In the midst of this tale a ship at sea is caught in a terrific storm. Buffeted by the waves, the boat rocks to and fro, when suddenly the crew hears an awesome crashing sound below deck. They know what it is. A cannon they are carrying has broken loose and is smashing into the ship’s sides with every list of the ship. Two brave sailors, at the risk of their lives, manage to go below and fasten it again, for they know that the heavy cannon on the inside of their ship is more dangerous to them than the storm on the outside.” After sharing that story, Stephen Crotts and George Murphy conclude, “So it is with people. Problems within are often much more destructive to us than the problems without.” They note “today, God’s word would take us ‘below decks’ to look inside ourselves concerning the whole” **“matter of forgiveness”**. (Stephen M. Crotts / George L. Murphy, Sermons For Sundays: After Pentecost (Middle Third): The Incomparable Christ, CSS Publishing Company, Inc.)

Our Scripture comes after Jesus gave instructions about the process a church member should use toward another member, who had harmed him or her. After hearing those instructions and Jesus’ accompanying teachings, Peter, the oldest of the original disciples, raised the subject of **forgiveness**. Perhaps, Peter recognized there would be times when the harmed member would be apologized to by the person, who caused the injury or hurt. Given the type of response Peter usually gave to such situations, I suspect he wanted to limit his responsibility. Matthew began today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading, ***“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?’”***

“No, not seven times,’ answered Jesus, ‘but seventy times seven’”. That response pushed aside Peter’s attempt to minimize how often he would have to forgive someone. Jesus immediately went on to use a parable to teach his disciples the importance of forgiving.

Before examining further Jesus’ point in today’s Scripture, let me share some of my personal experience related to forgiveness. First, being only human, I have communicated or done things for which I have apologized and many of those apologies have been accepted with forgiveness, for which I am grateful. The process of a sincere apology answered with forgiveness provides the opportunity for me and you to ***“have won your brother back”***, as Jesus explained earlier in Chapter 18.

The second type of experience I have had, like everyone else, is one where someone brought or sought to bring harm to me. It is especially tempting for very unhappy persons to unload their negative emotions on a leader of a voluntary organization, since their work or families – their non-voluntary relationships are usually the source of why they are angry or afraid or under stress. And yes, there have been times when someone had great personal animosity toward me and my family and expressed that in words and/or actions. Of course, there have been a few times when someone eventually apologized for their intentional attacks and I have been happy to accept their apology with forgiveness. That enabled reconciliation. There have also been occasions when a person or persons have been exposed – caught acting deceitfully and destructively, so in order to technically free them from blame, they apologized but their clear intentions were to continue the same type of behavior. Under those kind of circumstances, reconciliation does not take place.

There are, unfortunately, individuals, who unapologetically seek to continue to bring harm or who are generally abusive. A considerable number of pastors have dropped out of ministry because of the emotional toll on their lives and families resulting from dealing with those, who are unapologetic about their attacks. Pastors are not the only persons suffering because intentional harm is inflicted upon them by unapologetic adversaries. Frankly, when experiencing such situations, prayer enables me to forgive, even the unapologetic, to trust God will guide me, and praying enables me to respectfully and lovingly interact with those seeking to bring harm. When I hesitate to go through that process, I eventually recognize such delay results in giving the harmer continuing power over my life.

Returning to our Scripture, Jesus sought to argue the necessity of forgiving to Peter and the rest of his disciples by telling them a parable – a story. In it, Jesus set up the situation where the king was reviewing the debts of his servants with them. The first of those, whose debt was examined, was wealthy, owed a large sum, was told to pay it off, and was unable to pay it in full, so he begged for more time. Jesus said, ***“The king felt sorry for him, so he forgave him the debt and let him go.”***

The story continued with that forgiven servant going out and coming across someone, who owed him a very small amount but who was also unable to pay his debt in full. The forgiven servant violently attacked the poorer servant! Jesus

explained, *“His fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’ But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt.”* Other angry servants knew what the forgiven servant did and informed the king. Jesus continued the story, *“So he called the servant in. ‘You worthless slave!’ he said. ‘I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you.’ The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount.”*

Although Jesus did not specifically draw the parallel, he wants his followers to realize **God has acted to forgive all of us and we are called to follow the Almighty’s example by forgiving one another.** Stephen Felker confirms this understanding by sharing the story “of two friends who were walking through the desert. During some point of the journey they had an argument, and one friend slapped the other one in the face. The one who got slapped was hurt, but without saying anything, wrote in the sand, ‘Today my best friend slapped me in the face.’

They kept on walking until they found an oasis, where they decided to take a bath. The one who had been slapped got stuck in the mire and started drowning, but the friend saved him. After he recovered from nearly drowning, he wrote on a stone, ‘Today my best friend saved my life.’

His friend asked him, ‘After I hurt you, you wrote in the sand and now, you write on a stone, why?’ The other friend replied ‘When someone hurts us we should write it down in sand where winds of forgiveness can erase it away. But, when someone does something good for us, we must engrave it in stone where no wind can ever erase it.’”

Felker concludes, **“So real forgiveness keeps on leaving the sins of others and our hurts in the past.”** Finally, Felker says, “Yet Jesus understands the difficulty of such forgiveness. To keep on forgiving is a God-like characteristic. It is contrary to human nature.” (Stephen Felker, How Often Should I Forgive?)

After sharing the story about the king and the debtors, ***“Jesus concluded, ‘That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.’”***

Teaching about how one can forgive, Rob Voyle states, “resentment occurs when we **demand today** that yesterday they” [the persons who harmed us] “would have acted differently. ...”

Voyle instructs, “To forgive we simply turn the demand into a preference. We can see the person in our imagination and say to them. ‘I would have preferred for you to act in another way.’ [Here we want to say specifically how we wanted them to behave.]”

Voyle reveals, “Turning a demand into a preference is important because it allows us to maintain our values.” Voyle explains, “Forgiveness shouldn’t be about violating our values with a comment such as ‘It doesn’t matter.’ What people have done does matter, especially when our values are violated. ...”

Voyle continues, **“The last step is to wish the person well.”** Specifically, Voyle declares, “In my experience I do so without ever defining what that well might be. I simply surrender them into the goodness of God knowing it will be good for them and good for me. ...”

Voyle elaborates, “Forgiveness doesn’t mean we have to trust people who have clearly demonstrated they are not trustworthy, for that would be foolhardy. Forgiveness doesn’t mean we open the prison doors and allow people to endanger others. ...”

Voyle concludes, **“Forgiveness is independent of the person who has hurt us. Forgiveness is purely about how I personally resolve what has happened to me in the past.”** (from an article on robvoyle@appreciativeway.com by Rob Voyle)

Jesus does not allow us to believe we can limit our forgiveness. Instead, our Lord and Savior, the Son of God, calls each of us to repeatedly forgive – just as our Divine Parent repeatedly forgives us! Forgiving goes against our “human nature” or experiences of worldly living. We would rather stoke our anger and animosity – feed our resentment and get revenge – get even! As I shared today, it benefits the harmed person when she or he forgives. **Prayer is a great source of healing, comfort, guidance, and empowerment, so we can follow God’s example of repeatedly forgiving us.** Rob Voyle suggests a specific process for forgiving. **Allow God’s forgiveness to be your example and open yourself to the liberated life in Jesus Christ, as we recommit ourselves to obeying his call to “forgive your brother (and sister) from your heart.”** It is a matter of forgiveness! Amen.