

The Cost of Unforgiveness

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Published in the Ministry District of Yorke Peninsula

Sunday, September 17, 2023

Our gospel for this morning is perhaps the central focus of the Christian message - forgiveness. If we can learn the lesson of forgiveness, then we have mastered the message of Christ. Indeed, Christ himself is the message of forgiveness, offering in his body the opportunity to reconcile ourselves with God. This is the theme of the bread and wine that we will share later today.

At the start of our gospel, Peter wishes to show Jesus that he is catching on. When a person wrongs me, how many times must I forgive? Seven times is this enough forgiveness before I can turn to anger? No, says Jesus, not seven times but seventy-seven times.

Does this mean that on the seventy-eighth instance, we have permission to get angry? No, Jesus is not talking about a number but rather something ridiculously high to keep track of. Forgiveness for the Christian is to be the way of life.

Jesus then goes on to explain that our forgiveness of others is not something that comes within ourselves but comes from the overwhelming experience of the forgiveness of God.

Jesus' parable is the illustration of it. Our forgiveness of others is to come after our understanding that we are in the position of having been forgiven the impossible debt we have to God. The debt that cost the life of his own Son. It is worth considering the enormity of the price that he paid.

Our forgiveness of others then is our sign that we recognise this great gift from God. So why does the church, which should be the source and example of forgiveness, seem so often to get it wrong? There is nothing so bitter in the church as those who have been wronged, perceived or otherwise. Indeed, many will seek to circumvent this passage by claiming it refers to our 'brothers and sisters', and so it is not necessary to forgive this person because they are not a brother or a sister (that is according to our definition of a Christian). And our purpose will adjust to ensure no obligation to those we don't want to forgive.

It may be because it is so easy for us to conform to the world's thinking rather than to follow the Christian way. Our society is following the United States down the path of litigiousness. If someone wrongs you, then you have the right, indeed the duty, to take them to court. We are all after our pound of flesh, our due compensation. In William Shakespeare's play - "The Merchant of Venice", we explore this outcome. Antonio had contracted to Shylock the Jew for a certain sum of money to finance his ventures; The Jew would get back at this Christian by the penalty being paid for by a pound of flesh. The heroine – Portia, offers the Jew forgiveness in the famous speech, "The quality of mercy is not strained..."

This offer rejected by the law is brought to bear, and legal revenge is so limited that it is almost impossible to extract. Portia rules that Shylock has the right to claim a pound of flesh from next to Antonio's heart according to the bond. Antonio's bosom is laid bare, and Shylock gets ready to cut. Portia asks him if he has a surgeon prepared to stop the bleeding once he has taken his pound of flesh. Shylock says, "I cannot find it. 'Tis not in the bond" (4.1.257).

Just as Shylock is about to start cutting again, Portia says the bond does not permit him to shed Antonio's blood. The laws of Venice are such that if any Venetian's blood is shed, all the goods and lands of the perpetrator may be confiscated by the state. Shylock realises that he cannot cut the flesh without drawing blood and agrees to take the money. However, Portia is unwilling to back down and only gives him the pound of flesh, further saying that if he takes a bit more or less, he will be put to death himself. Shylock, unable to comply with this stipulation, decides to withdraw his case.

Portia tells Shylock to remain in the court. She says that Venice has a further law that says that if any foreigner tries to kill a Venetian, the foreigner will have half of his property go to the Venetian against whom he plotted, and the state will receive the other half. In addition, the foreigner's life will be in the hands of the Duke, who may decide to do whatever he wants. Shylock is forced to kneel on the ground before the court, but the Duke pardons his life before he can beg for mercy.

Shylock instead asks the Duke to kill him, saying, "Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that. / You take my house when you do take the prop / That doth sustain my house; you take my life /When you do take the means whereby I live" (4.1.369-373). Antonio intervenes on Shylock's behalf and asks the Duke to allow Shylock to keep half of his wealth. He further offers to take care of the half he was awarded as a form of inheritance for Jessica and Lorenzo. Antonio's only requirements on his offer are that Shylock must convert and become a Christian, and, further, he must give everything he owns to Lorenzo upon his death.

Shylock, wretched and having lost everything he owns, tells the court that he is content to accept these conditions.

Revenge, although justified, is, as this play implies, it may be a right, but in the long run, it does not satisfy, and indeed, the cost is all you have.

And yet, the Christian way is different. Jesus commands us in the Sermon on the Mount, saying, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." In First John 4:20, we read, "Those who say, I love God and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars."

But when it comes to September 11 and similar, it feels like God is asking too much of us here. How could we ever offer love to those who would terrorise us and our world? We don't want to love them. We want to get them back. We want to retaliate. We want revenge so badly we can taste it. But if we go for revenge, it is our blood that we are tasting. Hatred consumes the hater. Revenge is never as sweet as we think it will be. Violence breeds violence.

This is not an argument because it smells of self-interest, but the ultimate satisfaction comes from forgiveness and not vengeance. On a national scale, the issue of the so-called other rogue states takes work. The dead demand that we do something, but all the rhetoric, all the posturing and sabre-rattling still take us to the point that, like Shylock in the Merchant of Venice, the pound of flesh must be extracted without the spilling of a drop of blood and this is impossible. The act of revenge has the potential to bring us closer to the abyss. If we are not careful, we may be found throwing petrol on the very fires we are trying to extinguish.

Forgiveness is the path to move on and probably the only way, but it is not and will not be easy to do this. It takes great faith, for we must entrust ourselves entirely to God. He might forgive, and we must accept that.

But there is a more personal thing as well. It is one thing to talk about National Forgiveness, but what about our lives? National forgiveness must be reflected in our willingness to forgive those who may have wronged us. This is not conditional on the wrongdoer - it must come from ourselves as we search within ourselves for those things that we cannot forgive and ask God's grace to forgive the perpetrator anyway. This is the reason for our gathering around the table.

As you approach the holy space, let it be an act of prayer that God will take us on this journey of forgiveness, first showing us those we need to forgive and granting us the grace to do so. Forgiveness is not denying that we are in the right or have been wronged, but instead that we will move on. Shylock chose the alternative and at what cost.

May we find ourselves as a forgiving people.

AMEN