**Don’t Mess with Forgiveness**

**Text: Matthew 18:21-22**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**September 10, 2017**

Peter is trying to have it both ways. He’s looking for a loophole. He wants to find some way to honor the biblical tradition of forgiveness while still holding a grudge. I think he’s really peeved with someone. Peter’s tried real hard to be gracious up ‘til now; he’s forgiven this person more than once, but his patience is wearing thin. So, he’s looking for an out. He’s maybe searching for a way to stop being kind and gentle so that he can just be *angry* at the guy!

So he puts the question to Jesus: “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Because Peter’s probably thinking, “I’ve already forgiven him 6 times. Just let me know that I only have to do it one more time, Lord, and then I can hammer him!”

But Jesus says, “No, Peter; not seven times, but seventy-seven.” Or, in the translation that many of us grew-up with, Jesus says, “Seventy times seven.”

Let’s see, seventy times seven…that’s 490. But let’s be clear right off the bat: Jesus doesn’t really want us to keep track here. He’s not counseling us to forgive 488 times, 489, 490; okay, now I can hammer the guy!” No, the point is to forgive not literally 490 times but an *infinite* number of times.

Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Gospel. When we fail to forgive, it’s like we’ve built a brick wall between ourselves and others. And if we’ve separated ourselves from others, then we’ve separated ourselves from God. Because, as we read in 1 John, “How can you hate your brother or sister and love God?” (see 1 John 4:19-21). But reconciliation with others and with God is what Christianity is all about (see 2 Corinthians 5:16-21). Not separation, but reconciliation. And forgiveness is the means by which we are reconciled.

Forgiveness is really enlightened self-interest. Because, when you fail to forgive, the person whom you end up hurting is…yourself. Frederick Buechner has said that failure to forgive is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Failure to forgive causes all sorts of anger and resentment to build-up inside yourself, and all of that junk acts like a corrosive acid upon your soul.

It is in Matthew’s gospel especially that forgiveness is lifted-up as perhaps the loftiest of Christian virtues. Which is really interesting because Matthew’s Jesus sets the bar very high in terms of moral expectations. And often, those with especially high standards are the least likely to forgive. You know, “If you meet my standards, then I will accept you. But if you fail to do so, then you’re a bum.” I don’t know about you but I’ve known some people over the years who operate that way. I have to confess that there’ve been some times when I’ve been one of them. Those with high standards sometimes have trouble forgiving. But here we have Matthew’s Jesus with very high moral standards, but at the *top* of that list of virtues is the call to forgive one another.

Note that I’m saying, “Matthew’s Jesus;” I’m not saying “Jesus.” That’s because, in all 4 of the gospels, we’re not dealing with Jesus himself; we’re dealing with 4 different interpretations of Jesus. We’re not hearing Jesus’ words directly; we’re hearing those words as filtered through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These gospels were written decades after Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Jesus’ ministry occurs around A.D. 30, and Mark isn’t written until about A.D. 70; some 40 years after the Cross. And Mark is the *first* of the gospels to be written. By the time that Matthew is written – perhaps A.D. 80 or 85 – there is a fight going on in both Jewish and Jewish-Christian communities about the future of Judaism, and Matthew is in the thick of it. Matthew seems to reshape the stories of Jesus in order to address this issue of the future shape of Judaism. Because, for Matthew, Jesus is a good Jew. Indeed, for Matthew, Jesus is the ideal Pharisee. To be sure, Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, but as such he is also the ideal Pharisee. The reason that Matthew’s Jesus argues so much with the Pharisees is that for Matthew, the Pharisees aren’t righteous enough; the Pharisees aren’t sufficiently Pharisaic. These teachers of the Law do not sufficiently uphold the Law; but Jesus does. Matthew’s Jesus sets the bar so high that he says, “You must be perfect” (Mt. 5:48). And if you fall short of perfection *and* you fail to confess that sin, then when you die you’ll be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be much wailing and gnashing of teeth. There’s a whole lot of wailing and gnashing of teeth in Matthew’s gospel; which I think tells us a whole lot more about Matthew than it does about Jesus. Because you don’t see anything like that level of anger and judgment in the other 3 gospels, or in Paul’s letters, or most other places in the New Testament. Matthew had an ax to grind as he confronted his opponents, and he seems to use Jesus as the grinding stone. Like most writers throughout history, he reshapes the material that he’s received in order to address his own context and his own agenda. Which doesn’t mean that we should discount Matthew’s gospel. After all, as a certain preacher said last week, there’s meaning in the narrative itself; not just in the historical events that stand behind it but in the narrative itself. But we need to read the words of Matthew’s Jesus in the context of the late 1st century when Matthew was writing, not in the context of the early 1st century when Jesus was teaching. We won’t understand the narrative unless we read it in its historical context. Matthew is facing some stiff opposition, and he is one angry dude!

Which makes it all the more remarkable that Matthew’s Jesus puts such a heavy emphasis on forgiveness. If Matthew sets the bar very high in terms of moral expectations, he also sets the bar very high in terms of forgiveness. Forgive just 7 times? *NO!* Forgive over and over and over again, and repent and *be* forgiven over and over and over again, each and every day of your life!

There is no sin that cannot be forgiven. There is no sin that is somehow beyond the bounds of God’s abundant mercy. Yes, there is reference in Matthew 12:31 to an unforgiveable sin, but the nature of that sin is rather vague. My theory is that the so-called unforgiveable sin is the failure to forgive. And even then, God forgives the unforgiving sinner, but you won’t *experience* that forgiveness so long as you refuse to forgive *others*. Because, as we’ve said, that failure to forgive puts up such an impenetrable wall that you can’t experience God’s amazing grace which is trying to break down that wall and embrace you.

And here’s the thing: God *wants* to embrace you. God is *longing* to embrace you. The arms of God are right here, poised to hold you in the warmest, most comforting, most amazing embrace that you can imagine. But if you’re putting up a brick wall, if you’re holding God at arms length, if you’re pushing God away, then you’re never going to experience God’s embrace; at least you won’t experience it on *this* side of heaven.

My hunch is that, if that’s the situation in which you find yourself, than the person whom you most need to forgive is…yourself. How many of us are still striving to meet the high expectations of parents, or teachers, or older siblings; those overbearing and impossible expectations because somewhere, deep inside, there’s a wounded little kid who’s still trying to please that parent or teacher or sibling who maybe spent too much time demanding things of us and too little time praising us or thanking us when we got it right. And if you had a parent or teacher or sibling like that, then maybe you’re projecting those impossible expectations on God, and maybe deep down inside you’re afraid that no matter how hard you try, no matter how often you get it right, it’s never going to be good enough for that overbearing deity that we somehow imagine God to be. And so it’s tempting to think that I’m not good enough. It’s tempting to think that I can’t be forgiven. And when you’re being that hard on yourself, it’s hard to forgive others.

Let me tell you something: You are forgiven. You are accepted. You are loved by a God whose mercy is infinite! God loves you and accepts you just the way you are, and there’s nothing that you can do about it! There is nothing that you’ve ever done that God can’t forgive. Don’t give yourself so much credit. You don’t have that much power or imagination. Nothing will place you beyond the boundaries of God’s abundant mercy. Whatever you’ve done, whatever someone has done to you, whatever it is that you’re hanging on to, God forgives. The spiritual acid that is corroding your soul can be washed away by the grace of Jesus Christ.

I’m going to tell you a story about forgiveness. It’s a baseball story and since baseball is ultimately a silly game it’s tempting not to take the story too seriously. But there’s nothing silly about the feelings that are involved.

It’s Game 6 of the 2003 National League Championship Series. The Marlins are playing the Cubs in Chicago. It’s the top of the 8th inning, the Cubs are ahead 3-0, and they’re just 5 outs away from winning their first National League Championship since 1945. The Marlin’s Luis Castillo is at bat. He hits a high foul ball toward the left field wall. The Cubs left fielder, Moises Alou, tries to catch the ball for the 2nd out, but a fan named Steve Bartman gets in the way, the ball falls beyond Alou’s reach, and the batter remains alive. The Cubs proceed to fall apart, the Marlins take the lead and ultimately win the championship.

I watched the game on t.v. and it was heartbreaking. Woke-up the next morning and it felt like someone had died. A silly game, yes, but the grief was real. And so was the anger. Cub fans everywhere were angry at Steve Bartman. He received death threats. A police guard had to be posted at his house. For years Cub fans could not forgive Steve Bartman for his bone-headed play.

Fast forward to 2016. The Cubs finally win both the National League Pennant and the World Series; their first World Series title since 1908. When your team wins the World Series, each member of the team receives a World Series ring. So the Cubs hand out the rings to all 25 players, but they don’t stop there. They give a special World Series ring…to Steve Bartman.

What a wonderful act of forgiveness! I mean, who among us hasn’t at some point forgotten where we are and what’s going on and said or done something that’s been at best totally embarrasing and at worst has deeply hurt someone? Who among us hasn’t pulled a Bartman? Who among us doesn’t need forgiveness. As Will Campbell put it, “We’re all sinners; God loves us anyway.”

Somewhere there’s a church with a sign that says, “Sinners welcomed here. The preacher comes every Sunday.”

Sinners welcomed indeed. And not just in church. As Bishop Desmond Tutu said, “We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low.”

The good news is, you don’t have to wait until you get to heaven for some of that surprise. You can walk into all sorts of churches and find sinners who’ve been saved by God’s grace, who’ve experienced God’s forgiveness, who’ve been able to cast off the burden of guilt. All sorts of sinners, who – unlike the slave in Jesus’ story – have responded to God’s grace by forgiving others; even folks right there in the congregation with whom they’ve had difficulties for many years. Folks just like me. Folks just like you.

And so I invite you to come to Jesus this morning. Maybe for the first time, maybe for the 100th time; I invite you to come to Jesus. Kneel before the throne of grace. Drink from the fountain of forgiveness. There is no sin so great that His grace is not greater still. No hurt that you’ve received that can’t be healed by His love. No wrong so wretched that you can’t forgive, as He gives you the grace to forgive. You’re going to sing Just As I Am, and while we’re singing feel free to come forward: to confess your sin, to profess Jesus Christ as Lord, to be prayed over, or to make this community of faith your church home.

Just as I am, without one plea,

but that thy blood was shed for me,

and that thou bidst me come to thee,

O Lamb of God I come.