

September 8, 2010

“Conflict and Forgiveness”  
(Matthew 18:15-35)

Today, I'm going to try and catch up by dealing with two lectionary assignments in one meeting.

Our Lord is explicit as to the treatment that injures, those who injures and those who are injured. Beginning with the commendation of a child-like spirit in the preceding verses, He advances to the commendation of the forgiving spirit and the condemnation of the opposite.

Christ taught that the more innocent we are in the confessed wrong, the more power we have to heal the variance, and the more responsible we are for doing so. Both the doer and the sufferer of the wrong must seek to end the quarrel. First of all, Jesus says we are to act with privacy, “just between the two of you.” If others are communicated with first, it is harder for the two concerned to meet. In case the breach is not healed, the mutual friends of both parties are to be consulted, and if their efforts fail, the local church to which both parties belong must be consulted. But if the transgressor fails to respond to the discipline of the church, he is to be treated as a “pagan or a tax collector,” meaning as one who has put himself outside the fellowship of Christian fellowship. We are warned, however, not to allow such separation to become hatred (I Cor. 5:11; II Cor. 2:7).

This second of the parables comes directly from its context. It all begins with a question asked by Peter, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Peter probably expected Jesus to say, “Good fellow; you could not have acted more nobly than that.” After all, Peter was offering more than twice what the Jewish Law required of him.

September 8, 2010

However, Jesus used the situation to answer Peter in the form of a parable.

The story is of a king who held a day of reckoning with his servants. He found that one owed him ten thousand talents. He was about to cast the servant into prison and sell his wife and family and all his goods. But in answer to the servant's pleadings for mercy, he forgave the debt and let him go. Immediately that servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him one hundred denarii. He would not listen to the request for time to pay, but threw him into prison until the debt was paid down to the last penny. The other servants, enraged by this injustice went to the king and told him what had happened. The king sent for the servant and told him he should have forgiven the debtor as he had been forgiven, and because he had been merciless, treated him without mercy until the debt of ten thousand talents was discharged.

This parable has some very interesting comparisons. Ten thousand talents would be about \$12 million. One hundred dinarii would be about \$25. When you consider that the annual taxes collected by Rome from all the provinces in the region amounted to less than 1,000 talents, it helps to put the respective debts in perspective.

Adjoining the entry to the Good Samaritan Hospital here in Los Angeles is the Dosan Hall dedicated to Korean culture. When I last visited a friend who was a patient there, I saw an art exhibit in tribute to Korea's first community leader, Dosan Ahn Chang Ho, for whom the Hall is named. The exhibit documented his many contributions in America, his participation in Korea's independence movement, and his death in a Japanese prison.

From his life here in America, he realized that Korea would never be a strong, united country until its people developed a sense of

September 8, 2010

personal pride that would create the basis of a cohesive country. He began by instilling this resolve among his fellow immigrants picking oranges in Riverside. He taught them to have pride in the most mundane tasks, even that of picking a single orange. He opened schools to educate Koreans about pride and civic duty, and developed four guiding principles – “Mooshil” (Truth/Sincerity), “Ryukhang” (Achieving Truth), “Choongui” (Loyalty) and “Yonggam” (Bravery), and developed his now famous quotes, “Love oneself, love others,” and “We must correct our own mistakes, and be indifferent on others mistakes.”

One of the faults of the unforgiving servant was that he demanded standards of others that he was not prepared to demand of himself. Of all human faults this is most common. We are, for instance, very critical of others and very easy with ourselves. We are often open-eyed to the faults of others and unwilling to see our own. What is candid frankness in us is discourteous speech in others. What is selfishness in others is standing on our indisputable rights in our own case. What is cheapness in others is thrift in us. Should we fail in something we produce a half dozen valid reasons that in others would be feeble excuses. We should think more of Jesus commandment to do to others as we would have them do to us. If we treat others with the same understanding charity with which we usually treat ourselves it would be a happier world with fewer conflicts. Confucius, the Chinese sage, taught his followers, “If you want to be treated nicely, you must be nice to others, too.”

The main lesson of the parable is that we cannot receive the forgiveness of God until we have shown forgiveness to our fellow human beings. The parable may be said to be a commentary on two things Jesus said. First, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7). Second, “Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

September 8, 2010

At this time five years ago, then Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton attended services for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, at the Temple of the Arts in Beverly Hills at the invitation of Rabbi David Baron and spoke about a subject close to her heart, forgiveness.

She said, "I've had quite a bit of opportunity to think about forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a luxury. It's a responsibility. Forgiveness may not take away our pain, but the act of offering it will keep us from being sucked into the downward spiral of resentment. Learning the lessons of forgiveness is hard. It takes years, if at all, for them to become rooted in our own souls and hearts in a way that opens our minds and our souls to the real profound meaning and opportunity that forgiveness offers.

She continued, "My first real experience with observing the power of forgiveness came at the 1994 inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa. Mandela said he was especially honored to have in the audience three jailers from the prison on Robben Island, where he had served 27 years. I was dumbstruck that in the midst of this historic moment, the three people who were asked to rise – amid all the royalty, presidents and prime ministers and other important officials – were three of his former jailers."

The incident made such an impression that when she saw Mandela in ensuing years, she broached the subject. He told her that he got the insight about what hatred was doing to him as he was breaking rocks in a quarry one day. He realized that his abusers had taken everything away from him except his mind and heart. At that moment, Senator Clinton said the former South African president told her, he decided he did not want to live in bitterness and anger.

September 8, 2010

He said that when he finally walked out of prison a free man, he knew he had to leave the feelings of anger and bitterness behind or he would remain imprisoned.

Senator Clinton concluded with these final words, “Now, most of us will never face years of prison and hard labor at the hands of those who denigrate and degrade our very beings, but all of us will confront feelings of resentment, of being wronged. How fortunate we are to have an opportunity to take time out as you are doing here on Yom Kippur to think of the large issues that really matter in life. Each year, going back to Leviticus, the Jewish people have recognized both the psychological and theological power of atonement and forgiveness.”

Though forgiveness is a wonderful thing, we find in life, it is not forgiveness that governs our actions but the bitter heart and desire for vengeance. God’s inflow of mercy to us must coincide with our outflow of mercy to others. The Lord’s Prayer is very definite in this respect. It follows that when we pray this prayer with bitterness in our hearts, with a quarrel still separating us from another, we are deliberately asking God not to forgive us, because we have not forgiven others.

The contrast of the unpayable debt which the servant owed the king compared to the trifling sum owed by his fellow servant serves to remind us that any wrong done to us is nothing compared to the wrong we have done to God.

When we disobey God, when we disregard Him, when we move Him out of any part of our life, we are not so much sinning against law as we are sinning against love. We are not so much breaking God’s law as we are breaking God’s heart. It is possible to pay some kind of a legal penalty to compensate for breaking a law, but it is impossible to do anything to atone for a broken heart.

September 8, 2010

Therefore, the debt we owe to God is infinitely greater than any debt anyone can owe us.

We have the privilege of being forgiven by God and the duty of forgiving others. That is what a real Christian life demands of us. If we would enter into real fellowship with God, we must learn by His grace to forgive as He forgives.

Might the leaders of Israel and Palestine meeting in our nation's capital seeking to lay the foundation of peace between their governments be filled with the spirit of forgiveness as God forgives.

To God be the glory! Amen.

References: "All the Parables of the Bible," H. Lockyer; "The Gospel of Luke, Rev. Ed.," W. Barclay; "The Gospel According to Luke," N. Geldenhuys, The New International Commentary; "Matthew," J.N. Davies; "Luke," J.A. Findlay, "John," A. E. Garvie, The Abingdon Bible Commentary; adapted Barclay 086091; also 091207.