

Debby's sermon 13th September 2020 – Matthew 18: 21-25

Last Sunday, Julie spoke about Jesus' advice in dealing with conflict with other believers. It was an important issue and still is. All families have sibling rivalries and disagreements between the generations and the Christian family is no exception. But it is a bad witness to secular society when church members fall out - so we must move from conflict to conflict resolution if possible and if not, as Julie pointed out, the person causing the conflict may have to leave. This week, we go deeper into the damage human beings can do to each other. Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali said that forgiveness is Christianity's great gift to the world. It is true and it is right at the heart of Jesus' teaching. Think about the Lord's Prayer - Jesus' prayer training for his disciples - used in every Christian worship service. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Or the older form - forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

It sounds very simple but there are 3 ways we can understand that line. And all three are true! It could mean that we are like God - not to look at! but in character

Lord you forgive us our sins **and** we forgive others their sins against us. (because we are all made in God's image, with the possibility of being the greatest saint hardwired into us - or the worst sinner if we turn away from God)

Or that line might mean

Lord, please forgive us our sins **so we can forgive** those who sin against us (there can be a chain reaction - God forgives us and it sets us free to forgive others)

Or that line might mean

Lord, you only forgive us our sins **if we forgive** those who sin against us (God's forgiveness is on condition that we pass it on. And that is scary!)

Which brings us back to today's gospel passage from Matthew....

In today's gospel, Peter is thinking about forgiveness and he is doing well. At that time, if a member of the synagogue harmed another, they would be only forgiven 3 times. Peter asks Jesus how many times is right and suggests the holy number 7 - up from 3 - 7. But Jesus says 77 times or 70x7 times - he means forgiveness must be limitless. But then Jesus goes on to tell the seriously scary parable about the king settling accounts with his slaves. The first slave owes the king ten thousand talents. We need to know that ten thousand talents is an impossibly humongous amount of money. He is going to be sold together with everything and all his family and it will be nowhere near enough. But he pleads to the king and the king is merciful. He simply totally cancels the debt. You would expect that generosity would have a transforming effect on Slave 1. Nope.

Next thing Slave 1 does is that he tries to extract a tiny debt - maybe a couple of months wages - out of Slave 2. He asks for mercy but gets thrown into prison. The king hears and is so angry that he reinstates Slave 1's debt and he is handed over to endless punishment.

It's a sharp lesson to learn. Peter and you and I are made in God's image. We can be merciful just as God is merciful, generous with our judgements and unconditional with our loving. But sometimes we struggle with forgiveness. We can pray to be part of God's chain reaction - letting forgiveness cascade out and down through the wider community. But if we have unforgiveness in our hearts, God may not forgive us. That's why the Lord's Prayer is such an important reminder. It reminds us that we have a responsibility to be like God - after all, he has given his Spirit to live in our hearts to grow the character of Jesus in us.

Now this is where it all gets personal. I am going to assume that every one of us will have had some hurts and harms in our lives and needed to forgive those who did us harm. I am also going to assume that everyone of us will have struggled with some of those hurts and harms and not found it easy to fully forgive them. Because there are different stages to forgiveness. Telling God I forgive is one stage - and if I can't manage that, telling him that I want to forgive - and if I can't manage that, telling him that I want to want to forgive! Some families become split because of old grudges - whole sections of clans being asked not to turn up at a funeral because someone had a falling out with the deceased. There are also very painful betrayals which take long hard work to move through and on. And worst of all, there are people who take pride in their grudges.

And for this reason, I want to introduce you to a father and daughter duo who wrote what I think is a very fine book, "The Book of Forgiving, (the fourfold path for healing ourselves and our world)". The father is Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa and he chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa after apartheid ended while Nelson Mandela was president. Mpho, his daughter, is also a priest. The book was published 6 years ago and draws on the experiences of the TRC and the Tutus' life in South Africa. So much pain and hurt and injustice had been caused down through the decades. You might have expected South Africa to erupt in a frenzy of revenge when Mandela took over. But the Truth and Reconciliation Commission allowed everyone to tell their story and to name their hurt. Everyone was given the right to forgive (because holding on to the rage and resentment would corrode them) and then to either walk away from the abusive relationship or to transform it.

This is the fourfold path of Forgiveness and it can help on all levels from personal (you and me) to national or international. The Tutus book is still in print and it makes this remarkable process into something any of us can work through on our own, or with a trusted friend, or with a copy of the book, plus a medium-sized stone and a notebook and pen. You work through the 4 steps of "Telling the Story, Naming the Hurt, Granting Forgiveness, Renewing or Releasing the Relationship".

Why is it important to forgive? I have already said that God's forgiving of us is tied up with our forgiving of those who have harmed us.

Desmond and Mpho also say this about "Why Forgive?"

Forgiveness is beneficial to our health

Forgiveness offers freedom from the past

Forgiveness heals families and communities

We forgive so we don't suffer, physically or mentally, the corrosive effects of holding on to anger and resentment

Forgiveness is a gift we offer to ourselves

and finally - we are all interconnected and have a shared humanity. There is a beautiful Xhosa African word for this - ubuntu - and ubuntu theology is wonderfully inclusive and truly Jesus-shaped.

Let us end in prayer. Let us pray

Lord Jesus, thank you for your teaching on forgiveness.

Show us how to learn the art of forgiveness for our own health and for the sake of all humanity. Amen.