SIXTHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*From the Heart* Matthew 18:21-35

In case you missed it: Peter is front and center again, asking questions. This time he wants to know how many times one person needs to forgive another. What is more: from the way he phrases his question, it sounds as though he has given it some thought.

He begins with the assumption that we do have to forgive others. However, he seems to want to find out if there is a limit to forgiveness. [I]*f another member of the church sins against me,* [he asks] *how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’* [v.21]

One wonders if he had someone in mind, and if he had some secret place where he was keeping score—placing a hash-mark beside their name for every offense committed, and for every act of forgiveness he offered in return. One also wonders what Peter had in mind should a person deplete the allotted number of times to be forgiven. Jesus’ answer must have surprised him quite a bit.

*‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times* [v.22]. Thank goodness for Jesus’ answer! Seventy-seven times! In other words: more times than you can keep track of, Peter; more times than you are comfortable with. More times and more patience is going to be needed than you are probably comfortable with!

Having answered Peter’s question *quantitatively*, Jesus then launches into the parable about the king and a servant in order to answer Peter’s question *qualitatively*. He has already told Peter he has to forgive many, *many* times. Now Jesus is going to tell him how forgiveness is located not in the empty granting of pardon, but rather in the presence of a heart that desires honest relationships filled with trust and governed by compassion. Indeed, what Jesus is going to teach Peter is what happens when forgiveness is received or given transactionally rather than as an opportunity to do the work of creating supportive communities where relationships between people are safe and honest and kindhearted.

And so, he begins to tell him the parable of the unforgiving servant, or in the translation Laurie read, the unforgiving slave. Jesus does not start at the beginning of the story of the king and his servant. That is: we do not know how long the servant has been stealing from his master. We also do not know how he has managed to steal such a huge sum—*ten thousand talents!*

I looked it up to see how much ten thousand talents is in today’s money. The best I could do was to find an article written in 2015. Apparently, (eight years ago) ten thousand talents was equal to 200,000 years of labor. In cold, hard cash that would be $3.5 billion. In other words, the servant’s debt was much more than he could have ever hoped to pay back—even though the he very optimistically promises that he will.

The king is well aware of the foolishness of the promise the servant has made. He even knows that selling the man into slavery along with his wife and children and all of their belongings is also not going to cover the man’s debt. It would hardly have made a dent in it.

Still, in a moment of empathy and generosity, as the servant pleads before him, the king forgives this enormous amount of money and sends him on his way, free and clear.

The next scene in the story is the most difficult one. The first servant, having just experienced a gesture of grace and generosity that is more amazing, more massive than anyone could have ever have imagined, meets another servant who owes him a much smaller amount. By comparison, the second servant’s debt, 100 denarii, is minuscule.

Despite all he has experienced in the last few moments, the first servant is cruel and unforgiving. Despite the second servant pleading in the same way he just did before the king, the first man is unmoved and has the second one thrown into jail.

As he told this story, Jesus was pointing to several things that he wanted Peter and us to see and come to comprehend and understand. The first is about self-awareness and repentance. The second is about how important and precious grace can be in our lives. Finally, we are to also learn from the actions of the other servants who saw what was happening between the first two.

When it comes to accountability and self-knowledge, there is nothing like finally accepting it when you are hauled before the king and listened to him pronounce judgement. Not being able to refute the accounting of the royal bookkeepers, the first servant has no choice but to come to grips with his own criminal behavior.

Even he must have known that such a huge sum would eventually be missed. He also would have known that he would never be able to pay back the tremendous amount his has stolen. Yet, for some reason, he still offers to make restitution. In so doing, he has admitted and accepted his guilt. At this point, the futile attempt at repayment was not just about money. It was also an admission of his need of mercy, and a demonstration of his desire to make amends for his dishonesty.

Having been granted such a favor, one wonders why the servant did not learn something important about grace and forgiveness. Having just been released from the king’s wrath and the very real possibility of losing his freedom and his family, when confronted by someone in the same position, the first servant is cold and unforgiving.

Apparently, he has little gratitude or regard for grace and forgiveness, for generosity and compassion. At the very worst, he was like one of those people who think that these things are foolish; only offered by soft, naïve people who are to be scoffed at and taken advantage of. At the very least, Jesus showed Peter how easily we forget how precious grace can be, and by introducing the second servant, Jesus was also pointing to how even “small” offenses can lead to dire consequences—especially in a world where grace is in short supply—as it is with the first servant.

Finally, I would like to turn our attention to the other servants. Despite their rather small role in the story, I see them as being at the heart of it.

They are the ones who saw what happened between the first and second servants. They saw how the king’s gift of grace was tossed aside by the first servant, as though it was something cheap that had no meaning for his life.

It is their position in this story where most of us usually find ourselves in this life. Most of us—thank goodness—will not be the one who steals, or cheats, or causes harm to another and gets into trouble. At least I hope so. Most of us will also not be in a position to impose judgement on such people.

We will, however, be in the position to see what is happening around us. We will see the daily misdeeds, the indignities, and the small and large crimes that are carried out in a variety of ways, in a variety of places. We are the ones who witness the variety of ways in which people are harmed and made to suffer.

As the community that includes the big and little crimes that are a part of our life together, our role in the prevalence of grace and justice is to recognize those times when both are needed.

As a community who has daily experience with the grace of God—in the goodness and security of our lives, the many ways in which God has blessed and continues to bless us—we are also the ones who are called on to foster and encourage honest and compassionate relationships throughout the church, and throughout the community. Just as forgiveness is an on-going way of life, so is valuing good and wholesome relationships throughout our lives together.

In our own lives this amounts to doing things like calling for the apology to the Hawaiian people for the overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom in 1893. As the community who sees and responds to the injustice—as long ago as it was—we saw the continued suffering of the *Kanaka Maole*, and we went to the powers that be in our church, we raised the issue, and we saw it through until the apology was finally offered in 1993. Some of you here in this church were part of the group who made that happen. We participated in that road to mercy.

We can also do things like taking part in the Pride Parade that is going to be held next month, on October 21.

Along with UCC Judd Street and Community Church. Sorry, not Community Church, I meant to say Central Union. So with UCC Judd Street and Central Union, NCC has rented a trolley that will carry about thirty of us in the parade. (If you would like to be a rider, please see me after worship.) This is yet another way of embracing our GLBTQ sisters and brothers who have long been ostracized from family and community. It is a way of welcoming them, a way of apologizing for the suffering of so many for so very long. It is also a way of receiving forgiveness by literally walking beside them proudly and openly.

What both of these actions portray is an effort to apologize and receive forgiveness in ways that are deep and sincere. They are gestures that come from the heart. They are actions and activities that do the work of creating supportive communities where relationships between people are safe and honest and have real meaning and content because that is what can happen when we put aside counting the number of times we forgive, and instead allow the love of God to fill our relationships so that more and more people are made whole; more and more communities are places of human thriving and joy.

As we continue our faith journey together, I pray we will support one another in our efforts to forgive, and in our ability to receive forgiveness and begin again, together. May this be so. Amen.