

Sermon for September 17, 2017

"70 X 7 = ∞"

Matthew 18:21-35

Jesus' disciples were normal people. We fail to realize how much they were like us. Because they are in the Bible and they knew Jesus, we tend to idealize them. We put them up on a pedestal and call them saints: "They are not like us. They are Apostles and Saints." The truth is that Jesus' disciples were people just like you and me. They had their pains and their joys, just as all human beings do, and they had faults just like us.

Even Peter, the rock, had his faults. I imagine he probably even got into fights with his brother Andrew at times. Any of you with children know that brothers and sisters often fight. Peter and his brother Andrew were close. They owned a fishing business before they met Jesus and worked together. But like any brothers, I imagine they got into fights at times. Peter the older brother probably tried to boss Andrew around. After all he was older and wiser. And they probably got into arguments about how to conduct the business. I imagine Peter the older and more sensible one would say, "All the boat needs is a new rudder and it'll be fine." But Andrew, being younger and more ambitious, argued for a whole new boat. One with a fiberglass hull and an Evenrود outboard and one of those sonar fish finders. I imagine that words were said which could not be taken back. Feelings were hurt, and brothers injured one another. Peter was also close to the other disciples. For instance James and John the sons of Zebedee, also called the Sons of Thunder, were partners with Peter and Andrew. But despite their closeness they probably got into fights from time to time. After all they probably weren't called the "Sons of Thunder" for nothing. I imagine that words were said which could not be taken back. Feelings were hurt, and brothers injured one another.

I don't know who it was, but Peter apparently had a falling out with someone who he would call a brother. Peter may have been having trouble forgiving this person, so he went to Jesus and he said. "Jesus, I know you are always talking about forgiving people. You know turning the other cheek, and you said we should pray that God forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Should we forgive them as many as seven times?" You see Peter could bring himself to forgive his brother the first time he did whatever it was that was making him mad or hurt. Peter could even forgive him the second and third time, but he began to wonder how long this would go on. You know it is easy to forgive a little, but there has to be a limit right. After all a person only has two cheeks. Seven seemed a reasonable number so Peter thought "Maybe I should forgive only seven times."

We all know how Peter felt; forgiving someone can be difficult. When someone does something to us that hurts us, we want to hurt them back, not forgive them. Like little children on the beach, if someone knocks over our sand castle the first thing we want to do is knock over theirs, but we are adults. We should forgive them. Yet it is not easy. It gets even harder if the person really hurts us badly, or continues to hurt us again and again. It really becomes difficult if we call that someone "brother" or "sister" or "mother" or "father" or "husband" or "wife." You see the closer someone is to us the easier it is for them to hurt us and the more vulnerable we are to them. So it is difficult to forgive a sister or brother, even a sister or brother in Christ, who hurts us.

But when Peter asked Jesus, "Should I forgive my brother as many as seven times." Jesus said, "Not just seven times but seventy times seven." So Peter whipped out his calculator and said, "That's 490 times. Should I forgive my brother 490 times? And if I do can I whollup him one if he does it a 491st time?" Of course Jesus didn't mean literally 490 times.

The numbers Jesus used were symbolic. Seven symbolizes the fullness of God's work. In his answer Jesus squared seven and multiplied it by ten. He meant that Peter should keep forgiving his brother or sister just as God keeps forgiving us. So Jesus decided to tell Peter a parable which illustrated this. And that parable might have gone something like this.

Therefore the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to - a banker going over her books with her bookkeeper. As she went over her books she found that a farmer in that town owed her \$1,000,000 and he was delinquent on his payments. So she called up the man and said, "Meet me at the bank at 1:00 and we will talk about your delinquent note." The man showed up at the bank at 1:00 and they sat down in the banker's office. The banker said, "Now Mr. Barnes, I see that we have loaned you \$1,000,000 and you have fallen behind on your payments. Is there any way that you can pay?" Mr. Barnes said, "Not right now, the drought this year almost ruined my crop. And the market price was down this year. I barely got enough out of it to feed my family until next year." "Well Mr. Barnes, I am not in business to lose money. I have stock holders that I have to answer to. I am afraid you are a bad investment. I will need to foreclose on your farm and auction it for what I can salvage." "But please Mrs. Banker, I need that farm. That farm has been in the Barnes family for generations. You can't just take it away from me. I will pay you back if you just give me a chance. Please?" At this the Banker had compassion on the farmer and said, "O.K. I'll let you by. We will take our losses as they come."

At that the farmer ran out and the first thing he did was he found a man who did some odd jobs for him who owed him money. And he stood outside the man's house and said, "John, get out here now." And when John came out he grabbed him and said, "You owe me \$100 now pay up or else." "But I don't have any money," John pleaded, "and I need all I have to feed my children and buy them shoes for school. And my wife is sick and I need what little money I get from it to pay her medical bills. Please give me some time and I will pay you." Then Mr. Barnes saw John's old car, and he said, "O.K. give me that old car of yours. I should be able to get something for it. The junk yard may give me \$75 for it." But John pleaded with him, "Mr. Barnes you know I do odd jobs to make ends meet. I need that old car to get around without it I will be worse off than ever." But Mr. Barnes took the car anyway.

Well it just so happens that some of the workers at the bank overheard the meeting between the banker and Mr. Barnes. Later they saw him selling that old car and they figured out what was happening. So they went and told Mrs. Banker about it. She was furious. She called Mr. Barnes and told him to meet her immediately at the bank. When he arrived she sat him down and said, "You owed me \$1,000,000 and I let it slide. \$1,000,000 Mr. Barnes! Then the next thing I hear you are selling some poor man's car for a measly \$100. I showed mercy to you, but you did not show mercy to your fellow man. Because of that I will not show mercy to you. We will auction your farm next Wednesday. Now get out of my office."

When Jesus had finished his story he turned to Peter. And he said: God forgives so much of what we do. If we do not forgive your brothers and sisters the little things they do to us, how dare we assume God will keep forgiving us?

It's not easy to forgive. So we ask Jesus, "When can I stop? How much forgiving is enough? When can I stop turning the other cheek, and just whollup them one?"

Jesus replies, "Who said you could stop. You want God to forgive all the many things you have done. Why not forgive your sisters and brothers for the little things they have done?" Forgiveness isn't a matter of tallying rights and wrongs. Forgiveness is a matter of grace. God graciously saves us from our sin; we should strive to be just as gracious to one another.