

Unconditional surrender

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 14, 2008.

"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?"

Matthew 18:21

There comes a time when we all feel we have reached the limit of our tolerance and willingness to forgive. We all know people whom we find it difficult if not impossible to forgive because what they did was so very offensive and hurtful. The longer we bear that strong feeling of being unwilling to forgive the more it becomes fixed in our minds.

In ancient times a person was allowed to put a limit on forgiveness. You were supposed to forgive another seven times, after that, you could refuse to forgive. Peter feels that he is being very generous in asking how many times he had to forgive but Jesus tells him to forgive not just seven times, but seventy-seven times, or, as another translation puts it, seventy times seven. In other words, there is no limit to the number of times we forgive. God sets no limits on us; neither do we set limits on others.

In his parable of the unmerciful servant the unmerciful servant, after having been forgiven of his own debts, refuses to forgive the debt of a fellow servant. The point is that we are expected to show the same compassion and mercy given us. If we accept God's forgiveness to us, we cannot withhold our forgiveness to others.

To forgive means to let go and set free. When a financial debt or loan is forgiven, both the debtor and the creditor are released and taken off the books. The slate is wiped clean. It lifts the burden from the debtor's shoulders. In the Lord's Prayer we ask to be forgiven of our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, to be forgiven of our debts as we forgive our debtors. We may wonder how it is possible to forgive some people such as terrorists, mass murderers and child abusers. Do we have to forgive someone who takes the life of an innocent person who shows no remorse?

What about those who are unwilling to acknowledge their fault and either don't believe they are wrong or just don't care? Forgiveness has no limits, no matter how inexcusable the offense may be. Our forgiveness is not dependent upon the remorse of the person causing the offense. Remorse and regret by the offender helps, but it is not a requirement of forgiveness. There are those who are too proud to apologize while others are not affected by conscience.

I once knew someone who was so angry that he outright refused to accept an apology. His anger was greater than his sense of mercy. Though he later said that all was forgiven, the damage was already done. When we try to punish others by our refusal to forgive, we are held hostage by our own anger. We are our own victims when we refuse to forgive. It is manipulative to berate and chastise others.

Keeping score on the offenses of others is too much work and expends useless energy. When the accounting is erased, there is no trace or record of the offense. To try to bring it up again is irksome and manipulative.

John Wesley, the great revivalist, is said to have talked to a man who proudly declared that he never forgave anyone for anything. He wondered if that man ever felt that he had sinned. You can forgive the sinner without forgiving the sin.

Think about someone who has hurt you and how your feelings of anger, hurt and resentment keep you from forgiving. As long as you are unable to forgive that person, you are held hostage to your anger and hurt. To forgive is to release you from the anger and resentment that restricts you like a painful arthritic condition of the soul. While we can't change the events of the past, we can deal with our own feelings of hurt and anger. Our capacity to forgive must be unconditional. It is without reservation in the same way as Christ's unconditional surrender to the cross enabled him to forgive his persecutors.

To forgive and forget may seem difficult if not impossible. But if mercy received is mercy shown then unconditional forgiveness means forgetting in terms of putting our hurts behind us. By so doing, we are able to get on with our lives by conquering our hurt and anger. While some hurts are so painful that we cannot literally forget them, we can work through the hurt and make the effort to put it behind us. It is essential that we not forget those atrocities in history such as the holocaust and ethnic cleansing by genocide in order to prevent them from happening again. Warring nations can only reach a resolution when both sides accept the responsibility of putting away past wrongs and hurts.

As in a marriage, business partnership or the life of a congregation, it isn't important who is right or who is wrong, but how we resolve our differences, even if only to conclude that opposing views are irreconcilable. Trying to get even with past wrongs is self perpetuating. The time and energy spent on nursing old bitter wounds hurts eats away at our soul. Not to forgive perpetuates the old hurts and wounds of the past assuring their power over the future.

Let's not lose track of who we are as a people of God. Rejoice in the power that reconciliation gives us and see how it can be put to work in our unconditional surrender to God's sovereignty over all things.

It is our hope that each new child brought into membership in the church will learn the power of forgiveness to release us from our own hurt and anger, no matter who or what the offense.