

FORGIVENESS: IT'S ESSENTIAL
Exodus 14: 19-31; Matthew 18: 21-35
Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost • September 17, 2023
by Pat Berger

Every day, every day from the very beginning of time and until the end of time, every one of those days God has forgiven, forgives, and will forgive every one of the divinely created and beloved children -- forgives them time and time again. The children are forgiven not because they deserve it, but simply because our God is a gracious God. Think about how many times God must have forgiven even one of those children -- like, maybe, one of us, for instance -- how many times God has forgiven. And then Peter comes to Jesus and asks, how often should I forgive a member of the church -- as many as seven times? Do you think God must have laughed, laughed hard even, or maybe cried and shaken whatever passes for the divine head in utter disbelief?

Our God is a loving, creating God, and every time each of us is forgiven, God is at work -- continuing the creating in us, so that we might come closer to being the ones that we were created to be. One of the authors I read this week wrote, "I have come to believe that there is a liberating beauty and challenge in acknowledging that there has only ever been one human being: Jesus Christ. The rest of us are approximations. We are sketches. Insofar as we are unable to be compassionate, we are not being 'all too human' as much as not human, not yet."

For us to understand today's verses from Matthew, we need to remember that they were written in the early church; they were written after Jesus' death and resurrection. Things happen in churches -- well, you know; people don't always get along with each other, you know; and sometimes something might happen that would cause one to need to forgive or to be forgiven, you know. These verses were instructions to those within the church; they were not given to an audience of non-believers. And what makes the church into the church is: forgiveness. It is essential.

We must, of course, have a good grip on what forgiveness is. One commentator wrote that, "Forgiveness does not mean the embrace of violence perpetrated against us. It does not mean giving free reign to those who would do us harm. . . . Forgiveness is a gift of grace, a reflection of God's love, not the curse of abuse or a reflection of our worst tendencies as humans." Forgiveness makes righteousness real. Last week, we read the verses in Matthew about confronting one who had sinned against another, and if that one did not listen, witnesses ought to be taken for more listening, and then if one still did not listen, the person might have to be treated as an outsider -- gently, and with love, but as an outsider. These verses, today, are the good news: forgiving is an unending grace. A rabbinic tradition with which Matthew's first readers would have been familiar said one ought to forgive three times; Peter has asked if he ought to forgive seven times. Jesus as much as says that counting is a waste of time. God does not keep score -- I cannot imagine how God would.

The amount that the slave in Jesus' parable owed to the king, the 10,000 talents? One talent would be equal to 15 year's wages; 10,000, then, would amount to approximately 150,000 years wages! No one could owe anyone that amount! At first the king is very stern with the slave -- and then he forgives him the entire amount . . . as our God does. Think of some things that our God has needed to forgive this week: things you have heard on the news or things that have happened in the community or maybe we don't even need to go far from home to think of something God has needed to forgive. And the same thing is true for us that was true when Jesus talked with Peter: God is there for us, God cares for us; our God is a gracious God.

In a different way, that is what the Hebrew people were learning as we heard from the Book of the Exodus. Time after time -- not just three times, not just seven times, but every time that they needed, every step of the way -- God saved the Chosen People. It was too warm during the day? God provided them with a cloud for shade. Too dark at night? God gave them a light. And then there were those Egyptians, who weren't listening to Moses or to God; ultimately, there were consequences to be paid for their actions. This is not a story

about Israel, and it is not a story about Egypt; it is a story about God. God was there for the Hebrews, as God is there for us; God took care of the Hebrews, as God takes care of us.

Forgiveness is essential. C. S. Lewis said, "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a constant attitude." An anonymous person said, "Forgiveness is letting go of the hope that the past can be changed." Wise words, and maybe another starting place for our understanding of how it is that forgiveness is so important.

We have been forgiven very much. That same forgiving grace, God's grace, enables us to be those who forgive, and who forgive without counting. Seventy-seven times, or seven times seventy times (the Greek can be translated either way) -- and the number makes no difference. The Greek word for forgiveness can be translated to send away. All of the wrongs we have committed have been sent away. And all of the wrongs committed against us, we can send away.

Let us pray.