

Akron Christian Reformed Church

Harry Winters

September 17, 2017

Colossians 1.9-14; Colossians 3.12-14; Matthew 18.1-5, 21-35

The Forgiving Kingdom

Prayer: Merciful God, we enter your presence because your Spirit calls us. And we come because we have discovered before that you truly do love us. May your Spirit continue to blow through our minds and into our hearts so that as you speak to us we may hear you, understand you, and be transformed. Help us to live gracious lives within your Kingdom, in the same way you are gracious towards us. Amen.

I have a problem. I don't like rules. (I know, that shocks most of you.) Put a rule in front of me and I'll kick it and try to get around it -- especially a rule that doesn't seem to make any sense, which is the case for many rules. Which I know, if everyone acts like me, life will be chaos. But fortunately, I guess, there are more rule followers than there are rule breakers, which is good, because there certainly are a lot of people who seem to enjoy creating rules. Somebody has to make them happy by following them.

I don't know if I like the Kingdom of Heaven because it doesn't have many rules, or if I dislike rules because the Kingdom of Heaven has shaped me. Whatever is the case, the Kingdom of Heaven doesn't have the rules the way the church does -- which really suits my personality.

But there are a few expectations within the Kingdom. Perhaps, they aren't rules, but they're expectations. For example, the law of love governs God's Kingdom. Love God with everything you have, and love your neighbor as you do yourself. I don't know if that's a rule or not, but it's part of what defines what the Kingdom is. Love of God and neighbor is a Kingdom Expectation.

But there's another Kingdom Expectation. And that is forgiveness. Forgiveness is at the heart of the Kingdom of God, and therefore, at the heart of our faith. The Kingdom cannot exist without infinite forgiveness, and we can't fully experience the Kingdom without forgiveness flooding our lives and overflowing into the lives of the people who surround us.

But the problem is that forgiveness is always a twitchy subject because it's so difficult to master. At the heart of forgiveness is grace. To be forgiving means that we are gracious even to the people who have hurt us. But forgiveness gets twitchy, because whenever I talk about forgiving the people who've hurt us, you immediately start thinking about the people who've hurt you horribly in your life and you begin to feel guilty because you can't quite think about being gracious to those people.

You know, we immediately start to wonder, "How am I to be forgiving to the person who sexually abused me?" Or, to the person who berated you your whole life convincing you that you're inadequate. Or, to the person who turned your life around and you've never been able to regain your balance. Twitchy stuff. But, let's set those relationships aside this morning. They're bigger than what can be touched on in a little sermon. There are plenty smaller trespasses to consider forgiving.

As we heard this morning, Peter shows up one day and asks Jesus, "How many times do we have to forgive someone? Seven times?"

And Jesus says, "Well, Pete, how about 77 times?" Or, as when I was growing up it was, "Seventy times seven times, 490 times. What ya think about that number Pete?"

Now, if you think about either one of those numbers, 77 or 490, they look large. Forgive someone 490 times? My that's a lot. Why don't they start to get it right? That's what we're inclined to think – until we honestly look at our life.

When I look at my life and I think about some of the rather stupid things I've done to people I never see anymore, well, then that number 77 or 490, seems rather large. Many times I've offended people once and I never see them again.

But when I look at my everyday life. I quickly realize that Laurie has to forgive me 77 times in a single weekend. And 490 times probably doesn't even get me through a month. And even for you people who are really good people, you probably go through your quota in at least a year. Don't you think?

Those large numbers aren't so large when it comes to the relationships that really matter, the ones that we live and breathe within every single day. So, from that perspective we quickly grasp that Jesus isn't being literal here. If Laurie stops forgiving me at 490 times we would have been divorced within four months of being married – and I was on my best behavior back then. Really. I mean it.

Jesus is saying to Peter, forgiveness must be a way of life if you're going to fully experience the Kingdom of Heaven. And then Jesus says that the Kingdom is like the king who had an unmerciful steward. And the church, when it hears that parable, it focuses on the unmerciful steward, and tries to create a moralism. "You better be good and forgiving or the King will disown you." But that's viewing Jesus' parable through church eyes.

If you view this parable through Kingdom eyes, you focus on the king. And when you do that, you discover within the King lies great mercy and grace because he's so willing to forgive. And that's what the Kingdom is all about.

The Kingdom of Heaven, as we've been discovering the past few weeks, is wide open, and raucous, and wild, and filled with saints and rascals. The Kingdom can only exist if the Lord of the Kingdom is overflowing with grace and forgiveness. Because if he's not, well, then no one will be part of his Kingdom.

At the heart of the Kingdom of Heaven is the forgiving grace of God, which allows all of us, and everyone else, to be part of God's Kingdom. Don't get all high and mighty and pretend that your sins don't stink, because they stink just as bad as the most horrible person you can imagine. Our God, however, refuses to let the stench of your sin to separate you from his love. He refuses to allow the stench of anyone's sin to separate them from his love. Isn't that cool?

The parable that we call The Unmerciful Steward really should be the Parable of the Gracious King. It teaches us that at the heart of the Kingdom is the grace and mercy, the forgiveness of the Lord God, and we may only fully experience this Gracious Kingdom by being gracious like our Lord and King.

And so, the real secret in this parable is that by being graciously forgiving we liberate our own hearts and minds from anger and discontent. People read this parable and find in it the threat of hellfire for anyone who isn't forgiving. But that's not it. The reality is that when we refuse to forgive we create hellish suffering in our own life.

Think for a minute about the least forgiving person that you know – besides yourself. Now, do you also see the misery that they're creating in their own life? Forgiveness liberates us, the same way it liberated God.

God could have sat back stewing about how wicked and perverse humanity is. He could have sat back stomping his foot in anger and frustration at our depravity. He could have held a grudge towards us forever. He could have smushed our world by now and started over.

Instead, God is determined to be gracious and loving towards us. God is determined to heal whatever grievance there is between us and God, so that we may live in peace, without fear, and so God may live in peace without all kinds of unresolved anger. Thanks be to God for God's amazing grace.

So, what are we to do? How are we to live? What does it mean for us to live a forgiving life?

Well earlier in the chapter Jesus teaches that if we want to fully enter the Kingdom of Heaven then we need to live a life that looks like a child's life. And I think that for every single Kingdom Expectation, if we're wondering how we are to live, it would be helpful for us to watch children adroitly handle Kingdom Expectations without them even knowing that they're doing so.

So, when it comes to forgiveness, it seems to me that small children have a lesson to teach us. They're able to sing and dance and play and laugh and fall down and run from person to person, when they're comfortable and certain that they're loved. Watch the children during communion, they're teaching us how to live our lives. I'm serious about this. Watch the children during communion, they're teaching us how to live our lives. Don't you dare worry about their unselfconscious busyness while in the communion circle. They're comfortable with the idea that Jesus loves them and that we love them.

When we think specifically about children and forgiveness, we know that the smallest child is easily forgiving, over and over and over again. They may fight one moment and embrace the next.

My nephew's son almost got kicked out of Kindergarten for punching his best friend in the mouth and knocking a tooth out. But very soon after, since the parents didn't make a big deal out of it, those two were best friends again. Children are able to set wrongs aside and just move on in their relationship.

Like I said, Laurie has to do that all of the time with me. I'm kinda a jerk much of the time. But fortunately she does, so that we're able to continue comfortably with one another.

So, what does that mean for you and your relationships? Who do you need to be more gracious towards? Who do you need to forgive?

And like I said, don't begin with those people who've deeply, deeply hurt you. Start with the people you see every day who do things, or say things, that just piss you off. How can you be forgiving to those people?

Because I think it's true that forgiveness liberates your own heart even more than it liberates the heart of someone else. Be like God, let it go and open your arms. Twitchy stuff.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit