

SERMON : 15TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 2020 (*Matthew 18:21-35*)

MAY the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. <Amen>

I have struggled to read the press reports of the victim impact statements made during the trial of the man responsible for the Christchurch mosque terror attacks.

Janna Ezat weeps for her dead son every day. It was her birthday, and Mother's Day in the Middle East, when she received Hussein Al-Umari's body which was still riddled with bullet holes.

"He used to give me flowers for my birthday but instead I got his body," she said in court.

But, despite being haunted by that unimaginably painful horror Janna told the man responsible at the end of her victim impact statement she had chosen to forgive him; she said, "I decided to forgive you because I don't have hate ... I have no choice."

So, what does it REALLY mean to forgive someone?

That essentially is the question Peter is asking Jesus at the start of today's gospel. His suggestion of seven times is no accident - that was Peter's biblical signifier of what is complete or perfect. Peter wants to get it right. He's not asking Jesus what the bare minimum requirement is to 'pass the class'; Peter wants to ace the exam with a perfect score.

Jesus replies, though, with an astronomical figure - seventy-times seven. This is the response that forgiveness requires something even beyond perfection.

Forgiveness - requires - something - beyond - perfection ... let that sink in for a minute.

The goal is the perfection of perfection; infinity times infinity.

No wonder we have such a hard time doing it! However, there is hope in this response from Jesus; he is telling us that forgiveness is not about some sort of 'forgiveness count', but instead is about ON-GOING discipleship.

Put another way, forgiveness must become a way of life. It is beyond counting. Forgiveness is to become an absolute.

In the face of her personal tragedy Janna Ezat seems to do the impossible. Forgiveness is her way of life.

Forgiveness on such epic levels fits with the the pattern that Jesus gave to Peter, a forgiveness that knows no bounds; a way of life, ongoing, beyond perfection!

In order to embody this radical way of living, it might be helpful to try to name what exactly "forgiveness" is.

Forgiveness, on its most basic level, is a “letting go”. It is a choice that we make, regardless of remorse shown or not shown. It happens both internally within ourselves and externally as we engage with other people.

To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of OUR judgment, however justified we may feel that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair we feel such punishment may seem. . . Forgiveness means the original wound's power to hold us trapped is broken. We are released. We are set free.

But, as with most things that are ultimately good for us, it's often not the most attractive option unless we make the efforts. Our human nature seems to be to get sucked into our own anger. Such an attitude breeds resentment, which is when we re-live that anger over and over again.

Forgiveness challenges us to release those things that bind us.

This is what makes forgiveness such a theologically important concept - when we let go of that resentment and anger and relinquish the grudges we have, we open up space - space to experience all of the other emotions present in our lives; space to experience grief if we need to grieve, space to experience joy and hope in the promises of a brighter tomorrow, and time to work through other things that prevent us from living the lives God intends for us. **Most of all, forgiveness offers us the space to experience God's grace and love more fully.**

Let me be clear, though: forgiveness is not just “get over it.” It is not pretending that some wrong did not occur or forgetting that it happened or acting like the harm done is acceptable by condoning or excusing it.

Forgiveness is naming the offence and declaring that it should NEVER be repeated.

Forgiveness is also declaring that the offence will no longer take hold in our lives.

Forgiveness proclaims that mercy is what will define us.

I think that's what Jesus was hoping for in his conversation with Peter and the parable that followed; **that the lives of His disciples would be marked by mercy.**

Such mercy, though, can only come with a renewal of trust, which may not always be possible. If you aren't able to get to that point of reconciliation, right now, or ever, that is okay. Continue to work on the acts of forgiveness you are being called to give. It's hard, excruciating work, but remember this refrain:

“We try to forgive, but we are human too.”

Forgiveness calls attention to our humanness at its most human. It reduces us to our most base of instincts, and challenges us with the hard work of responding in the way of Christ instead.

Listen to these words:

“When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified Him there, along with the criminals, one on His right and the other on His left.

Then Jesus said, “**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**”

The lessons of Jesus can be daunting. They are big. Larger than seems possible.

But we need such big images to begin to wrap our heads around the nature of God, and such seemingly unreachable examples might just be what we need to begin to take even a little step in the direction that forgiveness calls us.

One opportunity at a time, then seven, then seventy, then seventy times seven. May we, little by little, move more into the ways of God’s mercy.

I runga e te Ingoa o te Atua, te Matua, te Tama me te Wairua Tapu.
In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit <AMINE>