

Sunday September 14, 2014

The reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, this morning, makes it apparent that differences in religious observances regarding matters of diet and holy days are under discussion and have caused issues of reciprocal disdain and contempt within the community. The recurring tensions between the Jewish and gentile converts to the Christian movement by such differences in daily religious routines constitute a running theme throughout the New Testament. Paul's appeal is that one should "accept" into one's own community the person of contrasting, even opposite religious practice. Paul desires to break the cycle of mutual condemnation that has regularly resulted.

Romans 14: 1-12

¹Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.

²For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume all Christians should be vegetarians and eat accordingly. ³But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. ⁴Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.

⁵Or, say, one person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience.

⁶What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for *God's* sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. ⁷None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. ⁸It's *God* we are answerable to—all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. ⁹That's why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other.

¹⁰So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly—or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit. ¹¹Read it for yourself in Scripture:

"As I live and breathe," God says,
"every knee will bow before me;
Every tongue will tell the honest truth
that I and only I am God."

¹²So tend to your knitting. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant appears only in the Gospel of Matthew and can be seen as one of the sternest passages in the Gospels. In this parable we have one debt, of an astronomical amount being forgiven, while the one forgiven does not forgive the debt of another, of a much more manageable amount. The conduct of the king in this parable is how we should understand the forgiveness of God. What is significant in this story, and what we should not lose sight of, are the amounts. These show the forgiveness of God, which knows no limits and so therefore neither should our forgiveness.

Matthew 18: 21-35

²¹At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?”

²²Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.

²³“The kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars. ²⁵He couldn’t pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market.

²⁶“The poor wretch threw himself at the king’s feet and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ ²⁷Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.

²⁸“The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten dollars. He seized him by the throat and demanded, ‘Pay up. Now!’

²⁹“The poor wretch threw himself down and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ ³⁰But he wouldn’t do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid. ³¹When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.

³²“The king summoned the man and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. ³³Shouldn’t you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?’ ³⁴The king was furious and put the screws to the man until he paid back his entire debt. ³⁵And that’s exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn’t forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy.”

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – “I’m sorry!”

Last week we talked about love and how it can be difficult at times to really love ourselves. We sometimes forget to see God incarnate within and it can be easy to fall into the habit of listening to those negative voices inside.

Today’s readings deal with issues that many of us also know all too well, issues around forgiveness and inclusion of those we see as “others” in the world today. Yet for many these issues are intimately intertwined and they can be seen as one and the same. In this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is asked questions about forgiveness and how many times one should forgive another. Peter, very generously, suggests that perhaps seven times should be the limit (Matthew 18.21). In the context of

the day, forgiving one 7 times would even be a challenge. It is important to remember that this story took place in a culture of shame and retribution, where, when one would be hurt, they would turn around and retaliate, which in turn would lead to more retaliation and feuds would escalate and continue on, possibly for generations. The law of Moses taught retribution, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Leviticus 24.20).

The rabbis taught forgiveness up to three times. Jesus, however, replies to Peter, “No, not seven times, but seventy times seven!” (Matthew 18.22). In other words, Jesus is saying that forgiveness should know no limits. But... our human nature tells us, and those around about us tell us, that if we are wronged we have a right to hold a grudge, and maybe even get even. Jesus says, “Not so!” Then he goes on to tell the disciples a parable about a king’s official who refused to forgive.

In thinking about this meditation I remembered a story I heard a few years ago about a Palestinian doctor who lost some of his children during an Israeli incursion into Gaza. As I searched out this story I found that he had written a book that was published called I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor’s Journey. The following is an excerpt from Amazon’s website about this book but I also understand my own limitations and so therefore I know that I am going to have trouble with some of the names in this piece;

“A Palestinian doctor who was born and raised in the Jabalia refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, Izzeldin Abuelaish is an infertility specialist who lives in Gaza but works in Israel.

The Gaza doctor has been crossing the lines in the sand that divide Israelis and Palestinians for most of his life--as a physician who treats patients on both sides of the line, as a humanitarian who sees the need for improved health and education for women as the way forward in the Middle East. And, most recently, as the father whose daughters were killed by Israeli soldiers on January 16, 2009, during Israel's incursion into the Gaza Strip. It was Izzeldin's response to this tragedy that made news and won him humanitarian awards around the world. Instead of seeking revenge or sinking into hatred, he called for the people in the region to start talking to each other. His deepest hope is that his daughters will be "the last sacrifice on the road to peace between Palestinians and Israelis.”

Not only has he chosen not to hate but Dr. Abuelaish has created the “Daughter’s for Life Foundation” in memory of his three daughters, who were killed by Israeli tank fire. The organization provides scholarship awards to young women to encourage them to pursue studies at universities in Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt. Although the doctor was already an important figure in Israel Palestinian relations, as the first Palestinian doctor to receive a staff position at an Israeli hospital, where he treated both Israelis and Palestinians, the death of his daughters has strengthened his belief in promoting reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. These events led to the call for a new way of being for all.

What does it mean to forgive? What does it mean to ask for forgiveness?

I will be the first one to admit that I am not really good at this sometimes, but I am getting better. There are times between Douglas and I, when I get angry and instead of talking to him, I clam up. He knows something is bothering me, and he keeps asking what is wrong, but I keep answering him with “nothing.” Eventually I will come to him and talk to him and he asks why I don’t say anything in the first place and I apologize for

my behavior. Does that asking for forgiveness and the resulting forgiveness wipe the slate clean?

I think I have used this story before but I will tell it once again as I think it is important. My sons were really good at saying sorry for things that they did wrong. I would accept their apology, forgive them, but low and behold if they would not just go ahead and do the same thing over again. This happened time and time again. Finally one day they came to me to ask for forgiveness and I asked what they were asking forgiveness for? They explained why they were asking for forgiveness and so I said part of forgiveness might be the understanding that the behaviors that led to the broken relationship in the first place will be tried to be changed. Does forgiveness allow us to just continue on with the same behavior as before, or is God calling us to something more?

If we look at the parable that Jesus uses in to illustrate forgiveness, we see the story of a king who forgives the debt of a slave. Now this is not just any ordinary small debt, it is an insurmountable debt, a debt that would take lifetimes to pay back. Once this debt is forgiven this slave goes out and runs across someone who owes them a debt. This slave does not forgive this much smaller debt, threatening to take all they had and sell the other, their wife and children into slavery, all of which would have been legal at the time. The king hears about this and what does the King do? The king forces the first slave to pay back the entire debt. Now this is rather strange because we are talking about forgiveness and yet in the second part of the story was the king really forgiving? Or is there something more going on here?

In the parable the king offers forgiveness to the slave, but when the slave does not pass that on to another, the king acts appropriately. This then seems to me that forgiveness is not about being a door mat for one to continue to treat us in a bad way, much like my sons continued on with their behavior. We are called to forgive, but then the onus passes on to the one we have forgiven to live a life that will also be a life of mercy and forgiveness, not a way that continues to treat people in ways that are inappropriate. I believe that what Jesus is talking about here is a life of being in right relationship with others.

This means that when we offer forgiveness to one, there is an understanding and acknowledgment that something has broken that relationship and that both who are involved in the relationship understand that there is a right way to be in relationship. So, let's stop for a second and think about how radical this would have been for those 1st century Christians. Their world was based on an eye for an eye and here was Jesus saying, "No," God's way is a way of right relationship with mutual mercy, compassion and forgiveness. This does not mean that the slate is wiped clean, but rather that the relationship is restored, but mutual work to change the behaviors that led to the breakdown of the relationship. David Lose who is the director of the Centre for Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary adds another dimension to this parable. He reflects on the possibility that the king in the story is actually not punishing the slave but rather, leaves the slave in his original life. Dr. Lose puts it this way, "What if we imagine that rather than inflicting some new (or old) punishment on the unforgiving servant, the king is actually only describing the condition his servant already lives in."

When we offer forgiveness we are challenging those to whom we have offered it to, to change and release the past, to open up into a new future, for both the person who has offered forgiveness and the one to whom the forgiveness has been offered.

This is not an easy thing to do in life, to move beyond hurts, to look and work towards relationships restored, if possible, always knowing there are times when this might not be possible. God's forgiveness is like the exercise during the Words of Assurance, it is like the air, there for us, always ready, but like the air we breathe, it does nothing if we don't exhale, which like forgiveness does nothing if we don't pass it along and work towards restored relationships. The challenge are those times when we fall short and feel captured by the past, those times it is hard to forgive.

Let us remember that forgiveness should never turn us into a door mat, but rather is a way, if possible, to enter into a new relationship, where mercy and love are paramount. Do we want to stay in those places like the slave in the parable, or do we want to move to a new place, a place where we can forgive and know that this does not mean that the same behavior is condoned, but that we work to live a new relationship in God. **AMEN**