

## ***SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST***

***Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35***

We Christians make some pretty bold claims sometimes. We say we are the most forgiving types, but as we say that, we know very well that we can be very hard and cruel some times. We say in one breath how forgiving we are, but we know very well that we are holding grudges.

Forgiveness isn't easy. Sometimes it's the most difficult, unnatural thing in the world, especially when we believe that we are the ones who have been wronged, because our human nature wants justice and revenge, and by holding back forgiveness we want to make the point that we are right and the other person is wrong. And so family members, friends, congregational members stay separated, more interested in getting even, than reconciliation.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus gives us a clear understanding of what forgiveness is. He asks us to compare the kingdom of God with a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants, to set things right. However, from our reading, we know things didn't turn out as the king had planned, his generosity backfires. The person who received forgiveness, treated his servant in the opposite way.

How do we feel about this parable? In the beginning we were probably pleased that the servant was forgiven by the king. We feel for the man who is helplessly in debt and shocked that his family must also suffer because of his foolishness. We are relieved when the king has mercy on him and forgives him

everything.

However, we probably have very little sympathy for this man by the end of the parable, because of his shameful treatment of his fellow servant, and we are delighted to see the king sock it to him. We watch to see the little wretch get what he deserves. He is so ungrateful. He had been forgiven so much, but was so hard-hearted toward the servant who owed him so little. We are delighted he didn't get away with it. What has happened to us is that our feelings flop flopped all over the place. After we get over our brief moment of sympathy and mercy at the beginning of the story, we return to a much more familiar emotion of vengeance. That ungrateful wretch deserved everything he had coming to him for being so miserly and unforgiving.

Jesus is a master story teller and the unforgiving attitude of the servant who had been forgiven so much, highlights our own unforgiving attitude and hardness toward others. When someone harms our sense of justice, how easy it is to become vengeful, how easy it is to say, "It serves them right!" As far as we are concerned, they are getting what they deserve. The cycle of vengeance and retribution, exists in our governments and the highest places of learning in our country, in our home, in our neighborhood, amongst our relatives and yes, even in the church. We live in an unjust world and we live for those moments when "what goes round comes round" and wrong-doers get what we think they deserve and accounts are settled. So, what are we to do as Christians to stop the separation and ill-will that can infect our closeness to the people in our lives?

What can we do to make forgiveness a part of every relationship in our families and in the church? Resentment and an unforgiving attitude lead to a complete breakdown in our families and brings unhappiness into the family. What can we

do to prevent this sort of thing happening to us?

Before we go any further we need to establish the fact that forgiveness has that unnatural quality of being undeserved, unmerited, even unfair. It goes against our basic instincts as humans. If someone offends us or hurts in some way, it's natural for us to want to break off our relationship with that person. Because of an unforgiving attitude and intolerance, we see children no longer talking to parents, neighbors ignoring each other, people dropping out of congregations and clubs. For these people there is no question about who should take the first steps to restore friendship, the person who has caused the offence. That's the natural human way we deal with disagreements.

As much as it might go against the natural grain to reach out with a forgiving hand to those who have offended us; it is the very nature of Christian forgiveness that urges us to do so. As much as we might look for loopholes, or for reasons not to forgive those who hurt us, Jesus leaves no room for doubt that just as God has forgiven us for our persistent and blatant wrong against Him, so also we are to forgive one another, even though we think the other person doesn't deserve it. Even though we feel deeply hurt by the words and actions of a member of our family, or a friend, or a member of the congregation, nevertheless, it is an essential part of our Christian faith that just as God forgives us, so we ought to forgive those who sin against us.

What this parable does is mirror our miserly notions of forgiveness, and contrasts it with the generous and extravagant love of the One who forgave us for everything. In short, the parable has a way of driving us into the hands of a merciful God. It reminds us of the extravagant and generous forgiveness that

Jesus has given to us through his death on the cross. He prayed for all those who had nailed him to the cross, including us, *"Father, forgive them"*.

In our daily prayers, we should ask God to forgive us for our rather miserly attitude when it comes to forgiving others. So often we are too preoccupied with justifying ourselves, and blaming others, that we forget that forgiveness is essential to our lives as Christians. We should ask the Lord to help us not to harbor resentment and hurt against the person who has offended us, but to take the initiative to restoring friendship again.

Forgiveness isn't an easy thing and so often we have to work hard at reflecting the same kind of forgiveness that Jesus has given us.

We should also pray for those who find it difficult to forgive us for the wrong we have done to them, and to help us to seek forgiveness and experience the joy that reconciliation brings in the name of our gracious and forgiving Saviour.

**AMEN.**