



Practice Love
Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35
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Today's gospel story is part of a larger discourse on forgiveness.

Last week, Jesus gave instructions on how to handle conflict within the community of believers. His first recommendation was for the offended party to go and talk directly with the offender and try and resolve the issue in private. If that didn't work, try to do that in the presence of mediators. Next step would be to bring the unresolved issue to the larger community and if that did not work still, regard the offender as a "Gentile and tax collector," meaning, love and pray for peace and the hope to re-include estranged member into the fold of believers (Matthew 18:15-20).

This week, the text starts with a famous question from Peter and an equally famous response from Jesus. Then Jesus tells a parable illustrating forgiveness and judgment.

Peter's question to Jesus might imply that the apostle is uneasy with the notion of forgiveness being unlimited. Let's not be ridiculous, Peter seems to say. How much patience are we required to have? And why should we bother if one keeps on offending? Do we encourage disrespect if we don't put a stop to the offence?

Jesus answers: Don't play the self-righteous. You are not without sin and God has forgiven you innumerable times. There ought to be no limit to forgiveness! (Note that "seven" is a "holy" number in the scriptural world. "Seventy-seven" indicates unlimitedness.)

No one is sinless. St. Paul reminds us of this when he plainly says: "[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified

freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”¹
No one can think to be better than another, superior to another for all
owe salvation to Christ and all are made saints through his grace. So,
there is no justified judgment to be passed on our brothers and sisters.²

The parable that Jesus tells seems to imply a catch: repentance must
come before forgiveness. No “honest” sinner will be able to benefit from
forgiveness without a soul-search and a heart-felt gratitude for the
forgiveness received.

As a repeat offender myself, I realize that “sinfulness” may become a
habit into which we fall over and over to our personal embarrassment
and the frustration of the offended one. Feeling sorry for oneself and
requesting forgiveness over and over again, possibly for the same
transgression, can become depressing and debilitating. Both the
offended person and the offender may start to doubt the genuineness and
seriousness of one’s repentance. Can the person ultimately be trusted?
Can the offender really hope to be freed of the vice and be transformed?

Both the offended person and the offender are presented with the
challenge to trust and grow in trust. But first a disclaimer: no trust
should be granted if there is physical or emotional violation. One cannot
put oneself naively, repeatedly, and deliberately in harm’s way.

But when physical or emotional violation is not the case, one is called to
practice and grow in trust.

Forgiveness is a personal journey. No one should be expected to rush
through it. Yet, keeping rancor and grudges is not healthy. It is said, “Not
forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”
Through small and incremental steps one can be trusted again. The hard
work of creating grounds for trust and a sense of safety remains with the
offender.

But the offended party has also work to do. Being offended over and
over by the same person requires one to stretch in trust and love. The

¹ Romans 3:23-24

² Romans 14:10

recurring offence is training ground for patience, trust in God, and love of neighbor. After all, how many times has the offended person done the offending? How many times has he or she been forgiven and given multiple chances to start over by God? How is this person going to love and show commitment to God in the act of forgiving a repeated injury? OK, so you are hurt?! Let me see you love now. Rise up!

That is why we daily pray: “Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us.” And we pray daily because it is a daily occurrence! Can we do without that prayer? Without that forgiveness?

Unless we are blind and hard-hearted, we can see the necessity of exercising forgiveness: an unlimited call to trust God and let go of our grudge. God will take care of the fire in our chest and transform it in flowing grace. Grudges are like blockage of an artery. Grace cannot flow. May we be freed of rancor and experience the renewal of grace that forgiveness may bring.

And maybe by the grace of God reconciliation will follow.

God's forgiving grace is lavish. We can be, too. Amen.