

Sermon for September 11, 2011.

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New Every Morning

Texts: Genesis 50:15-21 and Matthew 18:21-35

Sometimes it seems as if the stories told in Scripture are very far removed from our modern life as the church. When you think about it, this story of Joseph takes place more than 25 centuries ago. All we read today is the ending of this saga of jealousy, hatred, revenge, lies, dreams and nightmares coming true. Hollywood might tell it as a poor-boy-makes-good story. Or, as Hitchcock did in "The Trouble With Harry", the story of a guy who won't stay dead and buried. Joseph's brothers thought he was long gone, but then he turns up in Egypt. They ask each other, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong we did to him?" And then there's that ridiculous ending that even Walt Disney would have to tone down: the recognition scene, the tears of joy, the crazy extravagant forgiveness, as Joseph heaps gifts on his murderous brothers.

These ancient stories are full of strange customs and full of exaggeration, larger than life characters and plots. And yet, we don't need much experience of life to connect us with this tale. Who hasn't been thrown into a pit in life by some

circumstance, some misfortune? Whole nations have been there, including the United States, ten years ago, on 9/11. Who hasn't felt, down in the pit, angry, abandoned, beaten, lonely, hopeless? And who wouldn't hope against hope for a complete overturning of whatever misfortune we'd fallen into?

That kind of reversal happens in the Joseph story. The brothers didn't, after all, deserve forgiveness. Nor did their father, who had favoured one son over all the others. The brothers shrank from killing Joseph but they did sell him to a passing caravan and never look back. How astonishing then that Joseph says to them: "Have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." What a reversal!

If we look at the Scriptural big picture, we find Cain murdering his brother, Abel; Jacob stealing Esau's birthright; Abraham turning Hagar and her little son, Ishmael, out into the desert; King David murdering a man whose wife he has shamelessly stolen. We see that, left to ourselves, we humans can really mess up. We can fall into lots of pits, some of which we've dug ourselves. And yet God's desire is to save us this people, Israel. This is a God who wants this people to have life; wants them to learn how to live in the world with justice and compassion and peace. We are to be a people who are learning how to be

human, how to care for the vulnerable, feed the hungry, love one's neighbor. These stories can talk to us if we get right inside them and open ourselves to them.

For Matthew, the way we learn to live in this world begins anew with our encounter with Jesus and his teaching. Most of the time, Jesus needs enormous patience as he teaches and re-teaches his disciples. In today's story, you can tell Peter isn't gettin' it. He comes to Jesus with a suggestion for keeping the peace among the disciples and other followers. Matthew keeps this dialogue short but it might have sounded something like this...

Peter – Jesus, what if someone in our group is always disrespecting our group, giving us a bad name around town, making us look foolish time after time? How about we have a rule that when that happens seven times, there's no more forgiveness? They're off the team.

Jesus: Seven times? I'd say seventy times seven would be good.

Peter: But, but, that's 490 times! We have to give each other 490 tries to get it right?

Jesus: Oh, Pete, I just picked that number out of a hat. It could just easily be seventy times seventy times...

Peter: Stop right there! No one could possibly forgive a trespass that many times. All the forgiveness in the world couldn't suffice!

Jesus: Maybe right now, at this moment of time, in the corrupt and barbarous Roman Empire, there isn't enough forgiveness, but there will be. Forgiveness isn't like a pie you know, where there are only so many slices and then it's gone. It's more like that bread and those fish we hand out, where it looked like so little and yet all were fed.

Peter: I don't get it.

Jesus: Let me tell you a story, Peter. It starts with a king.

Peter: Oh great, a king. Like Herod, you mean? Or maybe Ahab? Who knows what a king will do one day to the next? Anyway, tell me about this king.

Jesus: This particular king needs cash to maintain his lifestyle and honour and reputation. So he goes to the servant in charge of raking in all the taxes, all the favours and the bling, and the king says to him, "Right, Tony" (we'll call him Tony) "let's take a look at the books and see how much you've managed to wring out of

my subjects.” The king is shocked to discover that expenditures have outstripped the budget by a wide margin and there seems to be some sort of slush fund, astronomical amounts of money and favours not accounted for. This servant, this Tony, whom he had trusted, was clearly skimming off the top for himself and his pals and had been for a very long time. The king was horrified, imagining the palace gossip, hearing whispers about himself being played for a sucker. So when Tony breaks down and admits he can’t repay the kajiooion dollars he owes, the king orders him to be sold, together with his wife and his children and all his possessions. There’d be no question of the King’s power and honour in the Empire.

Peter: See what I mean about kings? They have the power and they’ll use it if their honour’s in question. Otherwise everyone down the ladder will know the king isn’t on top of things, that he’s a fool.

Jesus: Well, there’s more to the story. When the servant, our Tony, fell on his knees before the king saying, “have patience with me and I will pay you everything”, the King had pity on him. He released him and forgave the debt.

Peter: I still smell a rat. Maybe the king figured the million kajillions could never be repaid anyway. Or maybe he figured he'd be admired for his pity. So, how'd that play out for him?

Jesus: Word of the forgiving act spread quickly through the palace and most who heard it indeed thought the king an honourable man. Imagine the king's dismay, then, when he was told that shortly afterward, Tony, having been forgiven and with his honour restored as well, went out and seized a fellow slave who owed him a small favour, nothing like his own fraudulent misdeeds. And when that one couldn't pay what he owed, when he fell on his knees and begged him for patience, he refused. Our Tony threw the unfortunate man into prison until he would pay the debt, deeply shaming his fellow slave and his family.

Peter: He must think he's like the king, with the power of life and death, able to make decisions on a whim.

Jesus: When next we see the king, is he angry! He says to Tony, "I withdraw my forgiveness, slave! And I turn you over to be tortured until you repay the debt, which you will never in a million years be able to do."

Peter: So, now the King's behaving as a real King again, not a made-up fantasy of a King. We're back in the real world, then.

Jesus: Story's not over. I have one more thing to say: "So my heavenly Father will also do to you if you do not forgive your fellow disciple from your heart."

I don't know about you, but when we get to that stinger of an ending to the parable, I'm a bit like Peter. I don't get it. Or maybe I don't want to get it.

Because what it seems to say is that yes, God's mercy may be given to the undeserving, to those little ones with no honour or status, but the gift of mercy is not a free gift. Mercy, apparently, has strings attached. It demands mercy in return. And our failure to forgive one another, even seventy times seven, has consequences, perhaps far-reaching ones.

Soon after 9/11, we in churches and synagogues and mosques began to wrestle with our understandings of vengeance and retaliation. America moved quickly from horror to assigning blame to war! We know more lately about the reasoning that led to such drastic steps, but there is still so much we don't know. And forgiveness is not much discussed outside faith communities.

And yet, throughout Matthew's gospel the disciples are shown how important it is for the followers of Jesus to live in two worlds at once: in the realm of Empire, which is inescapable, and in the realm of God which is offered,

and which is not yet fully realized. Will we live guided by capital and acquisition and power? Or will we live guided by Jesus' teachings about forgiveness?

I guess you could say we live in communion with the Forgiving One. MacNeill is a school where we learn week by week how to live in community, forgiving and forgiven. We learn how not to turn our backs on those of our small congregation who disappoint us, or ask too much of us, or try to lord it over us, or make us doubt our worth as disciples, called by Christ to heal the world. And if we learn our lessons well, if we learn to forgive each other, then we may be able to offer some wisdom to the wider world.

The centre of this school for forgiveness is the communion ritual we share each month. When we come to the table today, we remember that it is by God's grace that we are invited; that we are given yet another day, a new morning, to learn to love. We are not alone in this world. We have these friends, these beautiful children, the whole communion of saints, and this story of the One crucified and even from the cross offering forgiveness. We come to the table to be restored with bread and wine, to feed on all that is holy with thanksgiving, and to say to one another, peace. New every day is the peace of Christ for you.

Amen.