

Now, to Get to Bloomingdale's....

[Text - Matthew 18:21-35]

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The theme of today's readings is *Forgiveness*. I think everyone here would agree that forgiveness is a wonderful virtue. You don't even have to be religious to realize the tremendous value of forgiveness. Doctors of medicine and psychology tell us that *un-forgiveness* can cause ulcers, insomnia, and other physical and emotional ailments. And these ills can effect both the person who is not forgiven, as well as the person who does not forgive. Therefore, forgiveness is clearly the best path to take. In fact, it's hardly worth discussing forgiveness...except for one thing: When someone does something to *me* - that's intentional and malicious - and they knew better, but purposely did it anyway - and they think they're just going to get away with it - no, they need to be held accountable for what they did; so forget about forgiveness, because **they're going to get what they deserve!** [Sorry, I got a little carried away.]

Forgiveness **is** a wonderful virtue...except when the harm that's been done hits too close to home. When something is done to you or me, or to someone we love - something that's blatantly bad, and personally painful - then the noble notion of forgiveness can quickly get thrown out the window. Of course, it's precisely in those difficult and painful situations, that you and I need to exercise, or experience, forgiveness the most. Forgiveness has no real meaning or value, unless we can take it beyond theory, and put it into practice in those most trying of times. So maybe a sermon about forgiveness *is* in order - certainly not because *I* have mastered the concept or the practice, but because today's readings provide us an excellent framework for exploring this tremendously important quality.

Our New Testament reading begins with what was probably more than a hypothetical question. Simon Peter says to Jesus, "Teacher, if another member of the community sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as *seven* times?" Now maybe Peter just wants a

theoretical answer, but I doubt it. You may recall, that Peter is an intensely emotional and feisty fellow. He *swears* that he will never desert Jesus; and to prove it, he goes all Van Gogh in the Garden of Gethsemane, and cuts-off the ear of the High Priest's servant! But then, within the hour, Peter again swears - three times - that he's never even met Jesus. And then, when he realizes what he's done, he immediately weeps bitterly. Peter definitely displays a wide range of emotional intensity, which is why it's not hard to imagine that one of the other disciples may have pushed Peter's buttons. And Peter, trying to follow his new mantra, W.W.J.D. - What *Wouldn't* Jesus Do - refrains from simply boxing that other person's ears. Or *literally* "boxing" that other person's ears! Jesus had good reason for nicknaming Peter "The Rock"!

But Peter is trying. He is willing to go beyond the Mosaic Law of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" - he's even willing to expand the prescribed teaching of First Century Rabbis, which is to forgive a person three times. Peter doubles that number, and adds one more for good measure. He is willing to forgive someone up to *seven times*! Which he thinks should put him in the Guinness [or Galilean] Book of World Records, or at least earn him a special commendation from Jesus, for being so patient. But that doesn't happen. Instead, Jesus says to him, "Don't forgive *seven* times...but rather seventy times seven."

Oh...seventy times seven. [Well, let's see...Seven times seven is forty-nine, times ten, is four-hundred ninety.] O.K.,so that means that at four-hundred ninety-one, I can really cut loose! Nope, that's not it at all. What Jesus is saying to Peter, and to you and me, is that forgiveness isn't a matter of counting and calculating; it's a matter of committed and continuous compassion. Math, we can do in our heads; but forgiveness we must do in our hearts. Besides, if we've really forgiven someone, then we won't be keeping track of the number of wrongs that person does. Genuine forgiveness requires a willingness to *let it go*. Or, to borrow an image from Psalm 103, to be willing to remove that resentment "as far as the East is from the West."

Now, obviously, this isn't easy. We often want to re-play or re-live those wrongs done against us, over and over again in our minds. So perhaps it's helpful to look at Jesus' advice to Peter from this perspective: maybe it's not a matter of someone "sinning against us" 490 times [that's really a lot!] Maybe, it's just *one* sin - one bad thing - that someone has done to us, which we need to *continually* forgive - again and again and again - until we get it right. Until we can finally put that one particular incident behind us, and deal with that person in a fresh and graceful way. It's like that old joke about the tourist asking for directions in New York City: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" The New Yorker responds, "Practice, practice, practice!"

Maybe that's the same way you and I can get to the point of authentic forgiveness. Fortunately, there is a place where you and I *can* practice, and experience forgiveness, on a regular basis; and that's right here, within this Family of Faith. The Church is one of the few places on earth where people actually acknowledge that they're not always that good! On the contrary, we routinely confess our weaknesses and our brokenness; and we seek, together, a Divinely Restorative Power. We pray that the Gracious Holy One will "Transform our own weakness, into compassion for the weaknesses of others."

That's a truly powerful prayer! And it's one that you and I can pray again and again, because it reminds us that the practice of forgiveness includes telling the truth about *ourselves*. We *all* need forgiveness; and generally, we're extremely grateful when it's extended to us. So, in all fairness, you and I should also be willing to extend genuine forgiveness to others. How different Jesus' parable would have been, if that first man - who was forgiven so much - had allowed that grace-filled experience to shape his own encounter with that other person who owed him so little. Sadly, he immediately forgets the tremendous compassion shown to him, and responds instead with calculated coldness and hardheartedness.

In the one, brief prayer that Jesus teaches his followers, he includes this sentence about *forgiveness*: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive

our debtors.” I think that’s a fascinating phrase, “Forgive us...as we forgive....” Maybe what Jesus is indicating is that “as we forgive” - *when we forgive* - is when you and I truly experience Divine forgiveness. For when our hearts are open to forgive others, they remain open to receive that Divine forgiveness, healing, and grace which we ourselves desire and need.

It’s not that God is keeping a scorecard of our wrongdoings. [We tend to do enough of that ourselves.] It’s that *as we forgive* - when we stop keeping score on others and ourselves - we begin to recognize that we are all forgiven and loved offspring of our One Gracious Source. And as a community of God’s wounded, yet restored people, you and I can help one another find that inner peace we need to move beyond our pain and brokenness, and to see ourselves and others as God sees us: God’s forgiven and forgiving people.

For Jesus, teaching about forgiveness wasn’t enough. He knew the tremendous importance of taking that concept, and putting it into practice. So when it comes to doing the hard work of forgiveness, Jesus gives us the perfect example. He forgives his closest friends, who doubted and deserted him; which is not an easy thing to do. Sometimes the deepest pain and heartbreak in our lives is cause by those we love and trust the most. Yet Jesus forgives them. And he also forgives his enemies, whose fear and hostility toward him led them to take his life. Jesus is able to forgive that terrible transgression, because for him, forgiveness isn’t just a theory; it’s a genuine way of life.

I believe the reason Jesus could offer forgiveness, even in the face of extreme personal pain and unjust suffering, is because he had continually practiced forgiveness whenever and wherever the opportunity arose. So maybe that’s how you and I can best approach forgiveness today:

To start with the little things - every day - before they can take root and fester and grow;

To remember that we are all God’s forgiven, loved and cherished children;

To recall all those times when we ourselves have been forgiven - and revisit how wonderfully uplifting that felt;
In other words, to practice, practice, practice...until we finally get it right!