

“Letting Go”  
Matthew 18:21-35

In one of his stories, Ernest Hemingway, the famous writer, tells about a young man who wrongs his father and runs away from home to the city of Madrid. Out of great love for his son, the father takes out an ad in the Madrid newspaper, 'Paco, meet me Hotel Montana, 12 noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.' Now Paco is a rather common name in Spain, and so when the father gets to the hotel, he finds eight hundred young men waiting for their fathers. Hemingway's story reminds us how desperate all of us are for forgiveness.

But forgiveness is such a hard thing to do and seems like something we talk about more than we practice. It is interesting that this parable should turn up in a week that holds the date of September 11. After all, how can we forgive when the hurt is so deep and lasting? Think of some examples from your personal life and from our world: war, child abuse, negligent parents, murder, genocide, gossip, slander, racism, and so on.

Even Peter, one of the disciples of Jesus, as we read in Matthew 18 today asked Jesus about how often to forgive someone in the community of faith who might sin against him. According to the old teachings of the law, as recorded in the book of Genesis (4:24), the law of Lamech (one of the descendants of Cain) said that one would have the right for revenge seventy-seven times. Then came the law of Moses which was based on Hammurabi's (a Babylonian king and reformer) code of law to say an "eye for an eye." This was an attempt to limit the endless tribal revenge wars that went on for years. Even till this day in the Middle East, the practices of tribal revenge are well and alive. So, here is Peter asking Jesus if forgiving someone seven times was enough. He was not only being generous, but also radical in his offer. Yet, I believe Jesus' response was not only about numbers. It was about a radical way of life and forgiveness.

First the number "seventy seven" or seventy times seven is a very precise number. That is, this number is found only one other time in the Bible and it is in Genesis 4:24 and the story of Cain, the murderer, and Lamech. Cain gets revenge seven times and Lamech gets revenge "seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven." So, when Jesus uses this number he is addressing this way of revenge and calling for a major change. The story of Lamech symbolizes the cycle of hate, revenge and murder. Jesus breaks that cycle of hate and revenge. The number seven symbolized perfection in Jesus' time. So, this is a call for absolute and perfect forgiveness.

The second radical element of this invitation to forgiveness is the parable that Jesus told. We can read the parable and easily miss its shocking nature which Jesus intended in order to reverse the people's understanding of forgiveness. The parable is shocking because the king is the symbol of corruption and power in Jesus' time. Also, we have here the unjust system of slavery when people couldn't pay their debts, they became slaves. And the amount of money that the slave owed to the king was so tremendous. A single talent is equivalent to 15 years of wages. 10,000 talents would be the equivalent of 150,000 year of labor, while the amount that the servant was owed by his friend was only 100 denarii which equaled 100 days wages. So, to see this kind of forgiveness coming from a king must have shocked the listeners. The contrast between the two debts was so sharp to help people really get the message. Not only the amount was so incredible, but also the person who forgave was not a person who normally forgave others their financial debts. These people were his slaves. He owned them because they couldn't pay their debts. So, by forgiving the debt, the king was basically setting the slave free. The king must have been crazy. The listeners would have thought, "Sure a king would do such a thing!" They would have been shocked to even imagine such forgiveness. Jesus here is shocking his listeners with the use of this image to show them that God's forgiveness was limitless and their image of a vengeful God was to be transformed.

With this amazing image of forgiveness, how are we supposed to respond? If God forgives us in such tremendous ways, we are invited to live in the same spirit of forgiveness because we are filled with the Holy Spirit. But what does it mean to forgive others? What is forgiveness and how do we go about it? Are we supposed to forgive those who abuse us and just be doormats for them?

As we are called to practice forgiveness, we are also called to understand forgiveness. I believe that this word has been misused in the Christian faith for a long time. I am aware of the many

times I have encountered battered women who were told by their church to forgive their abusive partners because it was God's will. I am well aware of the racism that people endure silently because they are told to accept and forgive. I am also aware that forgiveness is not like a magic pill that would just take effect quickly and resolve all of our issues. I am aware of those dangers of misusing forgiveness to promote injustice. It is important to know that forgiveness is not about condoning abuse or injustice. It is not about reconciliation or making amends. It is also not about forgetting the past. It is not about whether the offender deserves forgiveness or not. That's why I believe it is important that we take a serious look at forgiveness. The Greek word, "*apheimai*" that is used in our Bible reading today for forgiveness literally means, "letting go." Forgiveness is about letting go of the emotional charge and pain of past and present hurts.

We are blessed that there has been a great deal of research about forgiveness in the fields of science and psychology. In 1998, a team from the Stanford University's School of Education began a study about forgiveness that has developed into the Stanford Forgiveness Project Model. Through their research they discovered the psychological and physiological benefits of "letting go." In your bulletin there is a Faith in Action piece with a short guide about forgiveness based on the work of the Stanford psychologists. One of the key points that I hope you will take with you is that forgiveness is a process that takes time. It does not always happen very quickly. The deeper the pain, the longer the time.

Yet, it is also important to remember that forgiveness comes from our heart. When we are filled with God's love and are able to allow that love to overflow in our hearts, we are able to release all the hatreds and hurts of the past. Forgiveness is essential for our spiritual growth because holding onto our hurts ultimately harms us. The theologian, Frederick Buechner wrote that, "Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you." Every time we are hurt, we have a choice to make: Do we hold on to the pain and resentment and let them define who we are or do we become intentional in our prayer and thoughts to let them go to be healed by the light of Christ. When we hold on to our pain and refuse to forgive, we eventually hurt those who are around us. Father Richard Rohr once wrote, "Pain that is not transformed is transmitted." This kind of pain interferes with our ability to love others, to be close to the people we love and to trust life and even God. Spiritually, as John of the Cross would quickly point out, attachment to a hurt arising from some specific past event blocks the inflow of hope into our lives.

The kingdom of God which is the central theme in Matthew 18 and the ministry of Jesus is about living in the fullness of God's love. The more we are centered in God's love, the more we are able to forgive and let go.

Once upon a time two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed without a hitch. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence. One morning there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days work" the man said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there. Could I help you?" "Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor, in fact, it's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to the river levee and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll show him what I can do. See that pile of lumber curing by the barn? I want you to build me a fence -- an 8-foot fence -- so I won't need to see his place anymore. That'll show him." The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you." The older brother had to go to town for supplies, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, nailing. About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job. The farmer's eyes opened wide. His jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. It was a bridge -- a bridge stretching from one side of the

creek to the other! A fine piece of work, handrails and all -- and the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming across, his hand outstretched. "You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers met at the middle of the bridge, taking each other's hand. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox on his shoulder. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother. "I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, "but I have so many more bridges to build."

#### FAITH IN ACTION

One of the great quotes from Buddha is this: "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned." Forgiveness is at the heart of our relationships. Christ helped people learn about God's unconditional forgiveness and invited them to live this way of life in order to experience inner freedom. Yet forgiveness is one of the hardest things in life. We always have to remind ourselves of its value and how it might work in our lives. Here are a few key points.

#### Forgiveness:

- is not pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, denying, or even reconciling;
- does not condone violence, abuse, or injustice;
- does not release others from the consequences of their behavior.
- is essentially a unilateral, private choice, a necessary first step in freeing oneself from carrying the heavy burden of resentment over past hurts;
- sets the stage for such future possibilities as reconciliation and restoring broken relationships
- Forgiveness is a force, an energy that comes from the heart.

Forgiveness is a process: Forgiveness is more a process than a onetime decision. Here are some possible steps. These are not always linear in succession.

- The "uncovering" phase of unconsciously nourished hurts arising from past events.
- The "decisions" phase when we attempt to understand the true meaning of forgiveness and choose to act on this understanding.
- The "work" phase when we consciously try to view our offender positively in a new light and to think of this person more compassionately and empathically. We also begin the interior work of recognizing and letting go of our resentments in their first movements within us and of refuting irrational thoughts, such as, "Every person is morally obliged to treat me according to my own standards of respect and justice."
- The "deepening" phase when we attempt to expand our vision of life to see meaning in suffering, to accept that life is not fair, and to find new possibilities for spiritual growth arising from perceived past injuries. By such practices, forgiveness gradually becomes an enduring attitude and a habitual reaction to negative interpersonal experiences.