

Sermons at Christ Church

Be a Joyful Gift to Others.

Pentecost 3

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus is slowly making his way to Jerusalem-the place where he will pay the ultimate price. Peter comes to him with this nagging question. He needs a resolution, not only for himself but for the whole assembly which he had been anointed to lead in the future. How often should I forgive? What is the limit? To what extent can I go? What is the ceiling?

Exactly 38 years ago today, early in the morning about 8:00 a.m., I got the life changing news that my father had passed away. I couldn’t believe it nor could I put into words what that meant for me or for the people that I cared about. Life had simply turned upside down and my hopes for the future felt all dried up. In fact I was way too young to even think about the future but I could tell that life wasn’t going to be the same.

My brother and I were 10 days away from enrolling in boarding school and so it didn’t really take that long for my father’s brother to step up and be responsible for us. My brother and I have had a good relationship with this uncle but for some reason he and my father were not on talking terms. There was this animosity between them. As to what generated that animosity, I do not know nor has anyone told me what caused this bitterness between them. But I remember that when my father was on his deathbed, he reached out to this brother, not once, not twice but as many times as he could to seek reconciliation with him. He sent family members and clergy to his brother, inviting him to visit with him, but all attempts failed. Whatever it is that may have caused this rift may have been very deep and searing. But it is heartbreaking for a kid to live through an experience of unforgiveness.

Why could he not forgive? What was holding him back? The same spirit which held him back isn't different from the spirit within you which drives you to deny others of the same mercy that you have freely received.

To embrace your godly divine self is to realize that there isn't any limit to extending mercy and forgiveness. More importantly, if you can forgive yourself, you can forgive others because you can see yourself in them. You can see your brokenness, you can see your fallibilities, you can see your mistakes, you can see your evil thoughts, you can see your selfishness, you can see your hatred and selfishness in them.

There are times and moments in our lives when we become so disillusioned and deeply hurt by the actions of others. And depending on the gravity of the offense, we may feel the need to pay back, to revenge for the wrong that has been done to us. We may have the rationale, the liberty and the justification to avenge a wrong, but should we?

Peter knows about forgiveness and revenge, but he is ambivalent about when he can revenge. The human tendency leans toward revenge. But he wants to know when he can act outside the bonds of God's commonwealth of mercy. Peter isn't debating whether a brother or sister within the assembly should forgive. He understands that forgiveness is divine, forgiveness is the justice of God. But how many times is he supposed to forgive?

Dr. Martin Luther King once wrote that "Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship. Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning. Forgiveness is the mark of the new community that seeks to draw a distinction between itself and any other community."

To right wrongs, we have to start from somewhere-the very place where we're in touch with our godly divine selves. Peter was hoping that Jesus will affirm his arithmetic, and put a limit on the number of times a brother or sister can forgive. But Jesus broadens Peter's perspective with the story of a king who wished to settle accounts with his servant.

The first servant owed ten thousand talents, which was a huge sum of money. But since he could not pay, the king ordered that he be sold, together with his wife and children. But he fell on his face and sought mercy. The king being moved with mercy, forgave this servant. But the same servant found another servant who owed him one hundred denarii-which was nothing as compared to what he had received. This servant pleaded with him, but he wouldn't relent. He put his fellow servant in jailed until he paid the debt.

This is where the story gets interesting. His fellow servants who saw their lord forgive this servant's debt were surprised that this servant who was forgiven so much, couldn't bring himself to forgive another servant who owed so little.

They ran to the Lord and told him what had happened. He quickly summoned the servant and asked him that one question we all need to ask ourselves, should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?

Could you not embrace that godly divine part of your life? That side of your life which flows with mercy and compassion. Forgiveness is divine. Forgiveness speaks to our godly divine nature.

We are all indebted to someone for something. We all owe something. You may think you do not owe anyone anything because you paid off your mortgage, school loans and payoff your credit card every month. I don't owe him/her anything, you would hear some say. But you owe something, if nothing at all you owe your life to God.

It doesn't matter how much we owe, but we all owe something. One of my favorite African authors is Chinua Achebe. He is from Nigeria of all places. He told this wonderful story about a man who loaned his neighbor some money. After the promised date to repay the loan had passed, the creditor went to his neighbor's house for the money. The neighbor simply told him that he would repay. But it looked as if this creditor worked for some collection agency. Every morning he went to his neighbor's house to demand his money.

One morning, when the creditor appeared, the borrower invited him to come into his room and showed him a wall which had vertical markings. Some long, some short some in-between. The borrower then asked the creditor if he could interpret what was on the wall, the poor gentleman responded that, he didn't know. Well, the borrower said, these are all debts that I owe. This is the debt.

This little tiny one. My major creditors don't even come to my house every morning to collect their debt. But you are here every morning because of this little money that I owe you. The question is, can I see myself in you? Do I see myself in you? Can I understand that I may need as much grace and mercy as you do?

Remember the story of Joseph and his brothers? He was able to forgive them not because he thought they were special people but because he was in touch with his godly divine self. He knew he was accountable to God.

He understood that you do not have to be perfect to love or to be loved. Joseph was keenly aware that you can only wrong those whom you love and you can only forgive those whom you love.

For that reason we are constantly being invited to forgive, not for the sake of the forgiven, but for our own sakes because you do not want to become creatures of bitterness, nor do you want to be consumed by the hatred that allows those who have wronged you to continue to dominate your life.

What's the limit? Asked Peter. There is no limit. Answered Jesus-because we do not live to ourselves, and we will all before the judgment seat as Paul said.

For that reason, Jesus introduces Peter, you and to me a new narrative. This new narrative is one where to freely participate in God's commonwealth of mercy, to see another person as a brother or sister, is to believe that extending mercy isn't a one way street, but a two way street-where your actions are measured not only by how much you receive but by what you are willing to give. That two way-street is about whether you are in touch with your godly divine self.

To embrace your godly divine self is to have it within you the power to be merciful and forgiving...you have been given much, much more than you deserve, much more than you can ever pay back. Not because of who you are or your station in life. You have been given more than you deserve because there is a merciful God who gives and gives and gives to each one of us out of the abundance of his store.

So, my beloved, be merciful to yourself, cut yourself some slack, forgive yourself. For your ability to forgive others depends on your ability to forgive yourself. You can forgive others, you can be merciful to others because you are no different from those whom you are called to show mercy. You can see yourself in them and they can see themselves in you. Amen.