

Proper 19A

“Does anyone harbor anger against another,
and expect healing from the Lord?”

Ecclesiasticus 28: 3

Two Sundays in a row God is dealing with us concerning forgiveness and healing in His word. God has his reasons. Why? There is yet need for healing: generational conflict that needs forgiveness and healing and cleansing. In our special vestry meeting two weeks ago there was a plea from our leaders with young families for unity in the midst of division. They are concerned for that. They want to bring us together.

I have heard repeatedly we need healing in this matter. God will not bless this church until we can be cleansed and healed from strife. God is not the author of confusion but of peace and a sound mind. Elsewhere we read of the anointing of Aaron the father of the Levitical priesthood under Moses, in Psalm 133:

Psalm 133

A pilgrim song of David

¹How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!

²It's like costly anointing oil

flowing down head and beard,
Flowing down Aaron's beard,
flowing down the collar of his priestly robes.

³It's like the dew on Mount Hermon
flowing down the slopes of Zion.

Yes, that's where GOD commands the blessing,
ordains eternal life.

In Psalm 103 today, we read that the nature of God is one who is slow to anger and of great kindness. In verse 12: "As far as the east is from the west, * so far has he removed our sins from us."

Beloved, this is major headlines for the church! Amen? We need to reach out to one another and bring everyone onboard.

In the Navy, when I was on ship, the USS Mississippi, we would pull away from the pier in Norfolk, VA and the cry would go out from the Bo'swain, "Underway, ship's colors!" Let me tell you, there were times when not everyone was onboard. What did that mean? That meant that someone's job would be unmanned. That meant that a shipmates' life might be in danger

because his brother was not at his station. That meant, that the sailor who missed ship's movement was in a heap of trouble.

And when as a chaplain, I would attend CAPT's mast for such infractions of the UCMJ, the Skipper would listen carefully for the reason for missing ship's movement. There would be few reasons short of having your mother die why you would not be on that ship. I once heard a Skipper say, "So when your car stopped working on the road, why didn't you call for a cab to take you to the pier and report your absence?" The CAPT would be slow to anger until a sailor made excuses for not getting underway and being on that ship. ALL HANDS on DECK meant everyone!

Beloved, God no doubt has found us missing from our duties. We are all accountable for failure to be on duty as Christians. In the letter to the Romans we read, "'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'" So then, each of us will be accountable to God.' " That includes those who have been forgiven much – you and I.

Peter asks the Lord Jesus why we can't just get by forgiving someone seven times? That's a lot? Most of us might think twice is the maximum required of any human being. People with brains

ought to know better to seek mercy if you tested the law more than you can count on one hand. Judaism of the first century taught that one should forgive another person one, two or three times, but probably not four times. In short, there was a limit to the requirement for forgiveness. Jesus responds with an answer denoting the unlimited and almost absurd quantity of forgiveness. But that's not the point. What is God saying to us here?

God is asking us to live by another standard. A higher standard requires more precise measurements. So Jesus tells Peter that he is going to up the expectation. The Greek word properly translated "forgive" in the New Testament means more precisely "to send off," "to hurl," "to release," "to let go." Therefore, to forgive is more than a passive sentiment. To forgive is an active process, almost a violent act of dismissal. Jesus says to do it endlessly. For most listeners in the first century as in ours, Christ's admonition is absurd.

In light of Jesus' teaching in last week's gospel (18:15-20), a member of the community becomes as a "Gentile and a tax collector" for not repenting of a sin committed. Today's parable (vv. 23-35) makes clear that the debt was forgiven because the slave "pleaded" for

mercy (v.32). Hence, there is no cheap forgiveness here. One must forgive as often as one is asked for forgiveness. One must be willing, if asked, to forgive even the unforgivable, unpayable debt because such is the mercy of God.

That a slave would have been indebted to the amount of "ten thousand talents" is inconceivable. Ten thousand talents is an astronomical amount. It would be more than the richest citizens in the empire would ever hope to accrue. Professor Eduard Schweizer (The Good News According to Matthew [John Knox Press, 1975], 377) reminds us that, "the sum is made up of the highest number used in arithmetic and the largest monetary unit employed in the ancient Near East." The servant of our gospel, realizing the precariousness of his situation, throws himself upon the mercy of his master. All is hopeless. And yet, just as the amount of debt is inconceivable, so, too, is the master's mercy inconceivable. Only God can do the unimaginable.

Sadly, the servant in our gospel today undoes what he received. He has already received mercy from the master. He has been forgiven a debt that no one, not even the Emperor could repay. Yet he remains

unchanged by such forgiveness. He goes right into town where he meets another co-worker and he grabs him by the collar and says, "You son of a beggar, you owe me so pay me now what you owe or else to debtor's prison you go." And the co-worker didn't have it. The one with the huge debt failed to learn that to be forgiven one also has to forgive.

Forgiveness is tied to the number seven and for good reason. Seven was symbolic of God and of the Spirit. It signifies spiritual perfection, fullness or completion.

- 7 is the second perfect number after 1
- In Hebrew 7 is shevah (shebah) from the root shava (shaba or sheba), to be full. This is also the word for "oath" in Hebrew.
- God made an oath and rested on the seventh day (Saturday) after creation
- To swear an oath in Hebrew is "to seven oneself"
- There are seven gifts of the Holy Spirit

God gave Man seven openings in his head so he might think a little before opening his mouth and walking into trouble. Only one of those openings can transmit and communicate - the others only receive. Sight, Sound, Smell, Taste

and Touch were given to us all so we might receive the goodness of God's love.

Seven is a divine number stretching our human ability to put up with incompetence, malice, stupidity and just plain old sin. We are asked to multiply seven by a multiple of seven. This was a number that would have been infinite in the mind of an ancient man or woman just like the number of the ten thousand talents.

Forgiving a person so much seems to be like turning one's back on human dignity and decency! Where are the scruples in saying NO to people who just don't understand the meaning of that word?

The gospel today tells us it's not about understanding "NO!" but it's about receiving and giving mercy to those who don't deserve it. As hard as this is to understand, take a minute and try to fathom whether you truly deserve to be loved as much as having another human being take your place on a cross! There is not enough time in this service to talk about that! Forgiven so great a debt as the servant in the parable is like unto being able to love so fully and completely as the number seven followed by seventy zeros. Only God can love and forgive that much. Yet, human destiny requires us to learn his ways. AMEN