Fourteenth after Pentecost
September 14, 2014
Barrhaven United Church

[Romans 14: 1-12]   The Rev.
Suzanne E. Sykes
Matthew 18: 21-35
        bucedu.min@gmail.com
                613 825-1707 (office)

Forgiveness

Forgiveness - probably the hardest thing we Christians have to do. Yet forgiveness, more than any other characteristic, makes us uniquely Christian. Christianity claims forgiveness as one of its central tenants. It's in our most sacred prayer - `forgive us our trespasses …. as we forgive others.'  It is in our own stated identity - `you will know we are Christians by our love' - and that love both demands and includes forgiveness.

The love Christians practice is founded on forgiveness. Christian love isn't a feeling or emotion. It's a discipline that is practiced and honed over years of prayerful observance. Forgiveness is the foundation of love and of peace and justice making. Forgiveness is a prayerful practice. Yet forgiveness remains the least understood and the most challenging practice of our faith.

Our text this morning makes it clear that Peter didn't understand it either. He thinks he's being generous and clever in suggesting that he must forgive seven times. But Jesus' response - 77 times - is a real shocker. Multiples of seven for the ancients was a magic number. It was like saying infinity. Forgiveness is unlimited.

It helps to understand forgiveness by identifying what it is not.

Forgiveness is not denial. It is not saying everything is ok when clearly everything is not. Nor is it saying that some wrong isn't a

big deal, when we really feel it is. It's not about denying hurt feelings when we've been wronged in order to satisfy some ideal of being a good Christian. Forgiveness is not the denial of our own feelings, hurt, or pain.

Second. Forgiveness doesn't require repentance. Let me say that again - forgiveness doesn't require repentance. It doesn't require that the person who wronged you says they are sorry. It doesn't require that they say they are sorry and really mean it. Forgiveness is not dependent on the attitude or behaviour of others.

Third. Forgiveness doesn't require that the person being forgiven knows they are being forgiven. In fact, they don't even have to be living.

Fourth. Forgiveness isn't some kind of inner work in order to get to a point where we can say it didn't matter to us, or that this evil might have been a good thing in the long run. Forgiveness doesn't mean looking for the silver lining. It doesn't mean saying that God sent this wrong to test us, to strengthen us, to teach us something. God doesn't send evil. Not for any reason. It's against God's nature to do so. Forgiveness isn't trying to see the good side of things.

Forgiveness stands alone. The phrase to forgive and forget isn't biblical. We aren't asked to forget the evil that has happened to us. We are only asked to forgive it and to forgive the perpetrators of it.

Forgiveness is a form of prayer. It's an attitude, an orientation, toward others, life and the world that is open, generous, hospitable. Forgiveness opens the channels between earth and heaven so God's desires, God's lure for the well-being of all creation and all creatures can work better, can more easily become actual.

Forgiveness simply means to will the well-being of the other. To lift the person up to God and will their well-being. Now this may not be so easy. It can take quite awhile to stop wishing someone

will get their due, their comeuppance, that they will be exposed for the evil frauds they are.

The first step in forgiveness is to stop wishing that. To stop hoping for some kind of divine retribution to fall from the sky and make them realize what they have done - more than that - to make them experience, to really feel what you feel. The first step in forgiveness, in willing the well-being of the other, is to stop wishing them ill.

We don't have to want that kind of retribution because we are assured that God feels what we felt. God feels everything that we, and everyone else involved in the situation feels, in every excruciating detail. And God's memory, unlike ours does not fade over time. For God every hurt in the history of the world is as vivid as the moment in which it occurred. Our hurts are buried and kept safe and remembered in God.

Willing the well-being of the other is what we do every Sunday in the silence during the prayers of the people. We lift them up to God and will their well-being. And lifting those who have wronged us up to God and willing their well-being is forgiveness. So forgiveness is part of the community prayers we pray together each week.

 Forgiveness demands that we pray for our enemies; that we pray for those who have wronged us. That's the glue that keeps the community together. That is the dynamic that has changed and continues to change the world.

The Bible is an account of how people came to understand who God is and what God wanted of them - how God wanted them to live in order to have abundant life. The Bible moves from unlimited vengeance being the accepted order of things, to putting limits on revenge: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. This was a radical change in the world. It said you could only exact from another what they had taken from you: no more. But then along comes Jesus and says that's not enough. You have to forgive those who have wronged you. You have to love

your enemies and forgive them. And that love and forgiveness is unlimited.

We aren't there yet. It is still a goal that the church, that Christians, strive to achieve. To live a life of hospitality and generosity requires that we practice forgiveness within our families, our communities and our world.

Willing the well-being of the other, the stranger, the enemy. Tough to imagine. Hard to live. Yet this is what is asked of us. It takes prayer. It takes practice. It means letting God in; filling our hearts with God's love. Forgiveness arises out of this openness to God. So we are called to will the well-being of the other, the stranger, the enemy. That is the mark of the Christian. That is what changes the world.

c. 2014, Suzanne E. Sykes