

WEEKLY SERMON

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Forgiving others is a key aspect of being a disciple

Matthew 18.21-35

We often hear it said, or perhaps have said it ourselves, I could never forgive someone for that!

Yet the Gospel reading for Sunday 13th September, the parable of Jesus about the unmerciful servant, who received forgiveness himself but refused to give it to others, makes it clear that forgiving others is a key aspect of being a disciple of Jesus.

We need to affirm first how hard it is to forgive.

We need to affirm secondly, that it is harmful not to forgive.

So where do we turn?

Peter asks Jesus:

How often should I forgive my brother? In those days the religious leaders said you had to forgive three times; so Peter felt he was being most generous when he suggested seven times. By bumping it up he was hoping for a commendation from Jesus, but instead Jesus said 77 times. In other words, a forgiving spirit is not a commodity that can be weighed and measured. It is an attitude of heart and not a matter of calculating whether certain limits have been reached.

The statement of Gordon Wilson, whose daughter Marie was fatally injured in the 1987 Enniskillen bombing in Northern Ireland, is legendary: "I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge."

How is such forgiveness possible? The parable offers three prompts:

1. Jesus' example

The servant's master forgave and showed generosity, so we are to note Jesus' forgiving spirit.

While hanging on a cross awaiting death, He prayed: 'Father, forgive them, for they not know what they do'

He does not require of us what He has not done Himself.

2. Jesus' mercy

If only the servant in the story had compared what he had been forgiven with what he was not prepared to forgive, then he might have seen his error and acted differently. Having received mercy, it ought to have been easier to give it.

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When we recognise how much God has forgiven us, it is unreasonable for us to withhold forgiveness from others.

3. Jesus' judgement

This is the bit of the story we prefer to ignore, but the servant's refusal to forgive led him to being separated from his family and normal life. Such was the seriousness of his crime.

The judgement we mete out to others is the measure of judgement we shall receive ourselves.

Conclusion

Our church communities will be healthy and transformative when the possibility of forgiveness is taught and then practised.

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