

Holding On & Letting Go

15 Pentecost A – Sept 13, 2020

Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

Matthew 18:21-35

21Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' 29Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' 34And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

This is part of Matthew's fourth great discourse of Jesus (18:1-35), which is devoted to teachings about relations among members in that community, relations between those inside & those outside that community, & the nature of life within that community. To illustrate the point to Peter that no restraints should be set on forgiveness because of repeated need for it, Jesus relates a parable that culminates in forgiveness offered once but ultimately withdrawn. It hardly seems the most logically consistent pairing. Jesus explicitly rejects "seven," and suggests instead -- what? The Greek can be construed either as "seventy-seven times" or as "seventy multiples of seven," and thus 490 times. Perhaps the evangelist's Greek is deliberately ambiguous, because those who wish to debate the "correct" number have surely missed the point: Don't keep count at all! There is to be no limit. Bernard Brandon Scott (Hear Then the Parable, 277-280) points out that the failure to extend forgiveness does not end with the

"unforgiving slave" in verses 28-30. That same failure to offer forgiveness is exhibited by "his fellow slaves" who report his actions to the king; they, too, are demanding what is "owed" by the standards of justice and fairness established by the king's initial act of forgiveness. If the "unforgiving slave" will not pay the debt of gratitude owed to the king for his graciousness, then he, too, should be imprisoned. Even the king, on hearing the charges brought by the "fellow slaves," reverts back to demanding payment of "his entire debt" (v. 34). The resulting damage goes far beyond just the personal plight of the slave "handed over to be tortured"; if the king's clemency can be withdrawn, then the whole social order is thrown into chaos. In contrast to such turmoil, as Scott observes, "God's is a kingdom based not on justice -- like for like -- but, by implication, on mercy". Perhaps God does not withdraw forgiveness for other sins in retribution for a sin of being unforgiving; rather, God responds toward people in the ways they demonstrate by their actions that they wish to be treated. Those who demand justice or reasonably limited forgiveness (as Peter suggested to Jesus) should expect God to do the same. Those who, instead, open themselves to moving fully into the realm of forgiveness will find God is already there forgiving them and helping them find forgiveness in their hearts for others. Thanks to: www.homileticsonline.com/

*The work of reconciliation is the goal of a Christian community **NOT** elimination of conflict; conflict just is....it exists. The church community is one of the few places that should teach people how to effectively and constructively fight with each other.*

Listening is a PRIME dynamic in conflict and forgiveness. Without mutual Listening, reconciliation is often elusive, premature, baseless and without strength. Agreement is not as important as LISTENING. Listening is a bridge across which reconciliation may cross. Listening has as a natural expectation – understanding. Fully listening births understanding....not necessarily agreement. To join with another in mutual understanding brings reconciliation (peace) even if there remains a disagreement in perspective, experience and decision....and perhaps even a change in the relationship.

See the attached Forgiveness Model as an addendum to Savage's Conflict Resolution Model.