

A Chinese Christian was explaining forgiveness to a group of people gathered ... (at the) mission hospital (in China where he worked). He said, "I will tell you how we (Christians) obey this commandment (of forgiveness). When you are sick or hurt, you come to the hospital and we nurse you, dress your wounds, and care for you, but you go away and revile us and lie about us. Then, when you are sick once more, you come back and we nurse you, and care for you again and again. That is forgiveness."¹

Last week as our nation began a new chapter in presidential administrations. In the weeks and months ahead, there is no Christians practice more important to our country and our fellow citizens than forgiveness. Regardless of what you thought about the last administration or what you think about the new one, our country needs to focus on forgiveness and all that it provides. We need to work through our differences as we embrace the values, hopes and dreams we share in common.

Discovering common ground with those you're up against requires making space for common ground to arise. And that's just not possible when we're stuck in the past, focusing on old hurts and prejudices.

We see this in today's New Testament lesson when Peter comes to Jesus seeking the way forward. Peter knows that Jesus is creating a new way of being, a way of coming together as people for the greater good of all. And he knows that that is never easy, particularly when there are strong differences between people.

So, Peter asks Jesus how they can possibly set aside such difference and find their way forward. He asks Jesus, "If another member of the church sins against me (or stands against me), how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And Jesus says to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Now truth be told, Peter was on the right track. In suggesting seven times, Peter is talking about complete forgiveness. After God created the world in six days, he rested on the seventh day because his work was complete. Seven is the number of completeness.

We are called to completely forgive those who do us wrong or stand against us. Otherwise, it wouldn't be forgiveness, right? You can't say to your brother or sister, I forgive you, and then hang on to a bit of resentment. That's not forgiveness. And without true forgiveness, there is no way forward. Revenge is the way of war; forgiveness is the way of peace.

¹ <http://elbourne.org/sermons>. Retrieved March 15, 2008.

Revenge brings loneliness, while forgiveness brings us together. It's the difference between feeling desperate or hopeful, sad or happy, finding a new beginning or being stuck at a dead end. And yet, too often we hang onto resentments instead of opening ourselves to forgiveness. Resentment is easy – if not also painful. Resentment takes no work at all, while forgiveness has to be practiced, again and again.

This is what Jesus shows us in comparing forgiveness to a king settling accounts with his slaves. Jesus says when the one slave could not pay and pleaded for patience, the king “released him and forgave him the debt.”

And yet, the slave is not truly free from the debt. Oh sure, he no longer owes the money. But he does owe a debt of gratitude, just like the gratitude we owe to God. God sent Jesus to give us a new beginning, to save us from a life of greed and vengeance and show us a better way forward, through truth and grace, and kindness; honestly, love and peace.

Yet too often, we don't appreciate this great gift. Too often we act like the slave released to start a new life who instead goes back to his old ways. Or as Jesus says, “That same slave ... went out (from the king and came) upon one of his fellow-slave who owed him (money). And seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’”

He shows no appreciation for the gift of forgiveness he received. Instead, he throws that gift right back in the king's face. It's like he never got it at all, which he didn't. He just didn't get what forgiveness is all about; we don't get what forgiveness is all about. Forgiveness is about us and God. How we treat other people is exactly how we treat God. We're either in a place of gratitude and humility or selfishness and disregard.

When we disregard the gift of Jesus in our lives – when we fail to treat others with love and forgiveness – then we suffer just like the ungrateful slave suffered. In Jesus' parable, the king “handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.” Well, we, too, are tortured by anger and resentment, when we fail to create a place of forgiveness in our hearts and in our world.

The type of forgiveness Jesus teaches us is a process of forgiveness, which we must practice every day. The first step in this process is having compassion for others. Jesus tells us the “king ... wished to settle accounts with his slaves,” which would relieve them of their burden, so they wouldn't be under the weight of their debts. When we forgive others, we relieve them of the weight of their guilt or the bad feeling that exist between us. By saying, “I forgive you, just as God forgives me,” completely, as Peter rightly said -that is an act of compassion that brings two people together, it brings our whole world together.

The second thing Jesus shows us is that true forgiveness is more than just words, like you see on your screen. No, true forgiveness is a process that actually creates a change of heart, a change of attitude that brings new actions. Jesus points to this when he tells Peter, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” While seven is the number of completeness, seventy-seven is the number of infinity, unlimited forgiveness, again and again, as you cultivate a loving and merciful heart.

Forgiveness clears the way for new, more productive relationships and interactions. And boy, does our world need that! Finally, Jesus shows us that forgiveness is a powerful thing. Not only does forgiveness bring healing between two people, but it creates a wave of healing that moves across the earth.

We see this when Jesus says the “fellow-slaves saw what happened” – saw the ungrateful slave demanding payment from another – and “they were greatly distressed.” Just like greed and resentment cause distress throughout the whole system, so humility and forgiveness can become a movement that spreads across the land, bringing peace where there was war, healing where there was injury, a new beginning instead of one dead end after another. Forgiveness is the way forward.

Our country is in need of healing, and that begins with a heart for forgiveness that creates space for something new to arise. Every time anger and resentment set into our hearts, we must meet it with forgiveness and the healing power it brings. This is true for our country and it’s true for us as individuals. By maintaining a heart for forgiveness, we can heal those places of hurt and anger still festering within us.

So I invite you, let God come into that place in your heart, right now, and heal it with the gift of forgiveness, forgiveness for yourself and forgiveness of others. It’s only from a place of forgiveness and healing that we can move forward, as a nation, yes, but also in our families, among our friends and neighbors, and within our own hearts, hearts which long for God’s unconditional love and acceptance. Amen.