

Year A Proper 19
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Peter asks Jesus a very important question, “Lord if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? (Matt. 18:21a). First off, Peter is not asking how we should interface with the world. That’s an important question each church member to decide, but that’s not what is being discussed here. One has the sense that Peter is thinking deeply about the community Jesus is building and wondering about its character and core beliefs.

Peter then throws out a number that, in his mind, was probably fairly generous. Should I forgive, “as many as seven times? (Matt. 18:21b) Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” (Matt. 18:22). In other words the church is to be a community that will forgive again and again and again. More precisely we are to be a community of reconciliation; that means we don’t just forgive when asked. We also take steps to facilitate the restoration of relationships. Why? Because that how God works.

Several years ago, in an effort to focus this parish church into a more intentional community, we began using a call and response that spoke to this very point. From the catechism in *The Book of Common Prayer*. The call began with the Celebrant saying “The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other through Jesus Christ” (p. 579). The people responded, “At St. Martin’s Church that mission is accomplished through our four guiding principles: Worship, Stewardship, Community, and Outreach.”

Becoming such a community is no small task. The first step is overcoming the very natural human tendency to sit in judgment of our fellow human beings be they in the church or out. The old saying goes that we are apt to “Judge everyone else by their actions and ourselves by our best intentions”. Such a gap can be a difficult to overcome.

In working to become a community of reconciliation let’s remember an important fact- forgiving someone else will not change their behavior. This principle is at the heart of systems thinking, brought to our attention largely through the work of the late Rabbit Ed Friedman. In systems thinking we recognize that none of us operates in a vacuum. My actions and behaviors cannot change any other person, but I can change myself. In so doing I can still have a positive impact on the various system of my life, be they work, family, or church. In changing myself I cannot change you, but I do have some impact on the system as a whole, which in turn can change the whole. The motive of forgiveness is love not control.

Although it wasn’t invented when Peter asked his question of Jesus, “Lord if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” (Matt. 18:21). Jesus might have used as an example a toy that was very popular decades ago- etch a sketch. This wonderful device has a red frame and two white knobs to control vertical and horizontal motion of the interior stylus. With every move, the stylus etches an impression on the screen.

The best part of all is that when you make a mistake, you can shake the whole device and start over. The screen has been wiped clean, and it can happen over and over and over again.

Just as we know young people have to be taught to hate, so they also have to be taught to forgive. One time Jesus' disciples came to him and asked him to teach them how to pray. Jesus response is now what we call the Lord's prayer and it reinforces today's teaching- "Forgive us trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Luke 11:1-4). So what we are doing here in the church is not just to keep things running smoothly inside of our organization, we are also teaching and forming young people, giving them an example of how life in community can sustain love after the initial euphoria has worn off- forgive on another as many times as it takes.

What's so interesting about forgiveness is that it is not a one-way street. Forgiveness is a couplet. To fully appreciate what God has done for us, we are also meant to be agents of forgiveness. Whether we are aware of it or not, our church, our community is influenced by each and every one of you. With each act of forgiveness, we shape the church into the community Jesus is still trying to build. With each grudge, with the remembrance of every wrong ever done us, we contract the muscles of the body, making it that much more difficult to move, to act.

Jesus gave us everything we ever needed to have a community of love- he gave us his teachings, his life, his example, and his spirit. All of these gifts remain available to us who are called to be practitioners of the faith.

Sometimes we practice the faith when we directly forgive one another. Other times we help set the stage. I am reminded of a priest once telling me of a couple who came into his office. From all the signs it looked like their marriage was disintegrating, but he told them he would sit there with them as long as it took. For four hours they poured it all out. He never said a word, but by his presence he was able to keep them engaged with one another long enough for them to remember that forgiveness is at the heart of the church, the community of love. *Amen.*