St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday September 17th

E te Atua aroha, e te Atua atawhai, kia whakapainga koe.

(God of love, God of grace, we give you thanks).

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Everyone who preaches is expected to preach on segments of the Bible.  So the temptation is always there to zero in on the text at hand, and forget about the all-important context of any given passage. Today’s segment from Matthew cannot be seen in isolation from last week’s offering.  There we were given Jesus’ now-famous multi-step “method” by which to deal with those in the “church” who sin repeatedly and fail to repent.  At the end of the day, Jesus says that when all good-faith efforts have failed to get this person’s attention, the offender must be put out of the church and treated like “a gentile or a tax collector.”  And that would seem to be that.  Unless, that is, you keep reading on to today’s verses, after which we must conclude that whatever else it may mean to treat someone like a gentile or a tax collector, it apparently does not mean that this person’s exiled status relieves us of at least the desire to forgive them.  We’re never finished with forgiving offenders.  Not ever.  What’s more, we should never *want*to be finished either.

(God’s forgiveness)

Matthew 18 reminds us of a core Christian conviction: Forgiveness is something we live, something we embody, every moment. After all, the very foundation on which our identity as Christians is built is nothing less than the death and resurrection of Jesus and the flood of gracious forgiveness which that amazing sacrifice unleashed.

“Forgiv**en**” is who and what we just *are*.

Forgive**ness** is not a tool we need just once in a while. Forgiveness is not like that screwdriver that we fetch now and then when a cupboard door is loose. Forgiveness is not a specialty tool to be utilized occasionally. It’s always there, expecting to be active, and to do it properly is truly hard.

Peter here (bless him), asks about the limits of the granting of forgiveness even as Jesus brings our attention back to the grace under which God has healed us. Peter wonders aloud how far our forgiveness should expand. Seven times of forgiving someone is already many more times than their culture. Rabbis taught that 2-3 times forgiveness was enough. Peter senses that Jesus wants the disciples to extend themselves even further, so he doubles the standard and then adds one for good measure.

(7 times or 70x7)

However, God’s standard is far above the world’s standard. Jesus said we should forgive seventy-seven times. (In the original Greek, this was actually 70x7). If we compare ourselves to others, we may think that we are pretty good. This is likely what Peter thought. However, we should not compare ourselves to other people or to worldly standards. Instead, we should strive to reach God’s standard. As I said, this Is actually very hard.

(Lord’s prayer)

Someone once said that the scariest word in the entire New Testament is that tiny little word “as” in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us ***our*** sins ***as*** we forgive *those* *who sin against us*.” That vital connection between asking for God’s abiding forgiveness of us and of our forgiving others tells us everything.  This is not some weird demand on God’s part.  No, the reason for the connection between God’s forgiving us and our forgiving others is because of the sheer *power* of God’s forgiveness.  It is so great that it simply *must and will* change us.

The main point of today’s parable is very clear. God wants us to forgive others. If we harbour unforgiveness in our hearts toward others, then it demonstrates we have not truly repented of our own sins and therefore God will not forgive us either.

Peter asks how wide our forgiveness should be, how many times must we be slighted before we say ‘enough’. How long, O Lord, before our reservoir of grace can be exhausted. This is a natural question, of course. We know too well both the small and large ways that others can tread upon us. We know too well that others can take advantage of our generosity. We know too well the sting of consistent affront. At what point do we say, “Enough?”

(No limit to forgiveness)

Jesus, as he often does, poses a radical suggestion: not seven but 77 times are we to forgive. Of course, what Jesus is suggesting is not a larger ledger upon which we can keep track of offenses. He’s not merely requiring an additional number of gracious acts. Instead, he is suggesting there is no need for a ledger whatsoever. Forgiveness is a deep reservoir of grace that ought never to run dry.

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Jesus likes teaching in parables. He tells simple but memorable stories that communicate profound and life-altering truths. The king represents God. We see in this parable that He is both just and merciful. He is willing to forgive sins and show mercy. At the same time, He wants us to show true repentance. And He will punish unrepentant sin. The servant in the story does not act like the king did. He did not learn the lesson of mercy that the king showed him.

The servant is unwilling to forgive a far smaller debt. One hundred denarii is one hundred days wages, a fairly large amount of money. However, the amount of money owed is far less than the ten thousand talents (One talent is equal to about 33 KG of gold). Yet this man is unwilling to forgive his fellow servant. Do we ever act with the same unforgiveness?

The context of these teachings is key. Forgiveness is a gift of grace, a reflection of God’s love, **not** the acceptance of abuse or the worst tendencies of humans. Parables like this are generally not teaching deep theology. Instead, they teach a simple and easy to understand point. In this case, God wants us to forgive others like He forgives us. That is this parable in a nutshell. We don’t need to make it overly complicated. Yes, Jesus’ teachings on forgiveness could well be confused or abused.

(Forgiving and enduring)

Forgiveness **does not** mean the embrace of violence perpetrated against us or anyone else. It **does not** mean giving free reign to those who would do harm. It **does not** mean a ready acquiescence to those who are stronger than us. So, within the context of God’s wishes, the question is “are we obeying this?” Are we forgiving others? How can we improve in forgiveness? At a personal level, when we say “I forgive you” do we **really** forgive the person or do we still actually harbour grudges that continue to fester away inside us?

(Absolution)

Each Sunday I pray the absolution after we have confessed our sins. Today I said – “Through the cross of Christ, God have mercy on you, pardon you and set you free. **Know that you are forgiven and be at peace”.** On other Sundays I say “God forgives you. Forgive others. Forgive yourself”, or “God forgives us; be at peace”. These are powerful reminders of the relationship we have with God, and the consequent expectations out of that.

(Lord’s prayer)

 God forgives us daily.  We therefore must forgive others daily.  Forgiveness should be our lifestyle, our habit. So, very time we say those words Jesus taught us for our daily prayer, we are re-affirming our request for God’s forgiveness and promising to do the same to others.

Amen

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