

The sermon today follows from last week's sermon, so they're a bit of a pair, really. Last week I was talking about conflict, and every conflict provides the opportunity for forgiveness, which is the theme of today's sermon. Forgiveness is not something that comes naturally. I had a rector once who always talked about the scandal of forgiveness, and what's scandalous about forgiveness is that it can appear as if somebody gets away with something. That they don't get what they deserve. Forgiveness goes against the grain.

There was an old man once, lying on his death bed, and he was deeply troubled by a long-standing feud that he had with his neighbor. So he had the neighbor called in, and the two of them talked and shook hands as the neighbor left. Just as the visitor went through the door, the old man roused himself, got up on the pillow, and said, "Remember, if I get over this, the quarrel still stands."

I know that the natural thing to do is not to forgive, and this is an extreme example, but I did hear, in England, about two sisters who shared a house who fell out, and they couldn't forgive each other. So what they did was they drew a line in chalk, right through the middle of the house, across the middle of all the rooms, and just lived like that for years.

In the Old Testament reading we had today from the Book of Exodus, it's clear that Joseph's brothers didn't expect that Joseph would find it in his heart to forgive them when they went to see Joseph, all the years after that they'd thrown him down the well. They knew that forgiveness wasn't easy or automatic. They said to themselves, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us, and pays us back in full for all the wrongs that we have done to him?" We all know we want forgiveness, but it's still so hard to forgive.

There's a story told in Spain of a father and a teenage son who'd fallen out, and the son had run away from home. The father, after a few months, began to search for him, and finally, in Madrid, because he hadn't found him, in one last desperate attempt to find him and be reunited, the father put an ad in the local newspaper, which said, "Dear Paco, meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you, your father." What they say is at the next day at noon, when the father went to the arranged place, there were 500 Pacos waiting there to meet him, all seeking forgiveness and love from their father.

We know we should forgive, but it's hard because it's unnatural. Auden, the poet, said, "I and the public know what all schoolchildren learn. Those to whom evil is done do evil in return." The law of nature admits no forgiveness.

Do squirrels forgive cats for chasing them up a tree, or do dolphins forgive sharks for eating their playmates? Of course not. It's a dog eat dog world, not a dog forgive dog world.

So when Peter saunters up to Jesus in the gospel reading that we heard, and said, "So, Lord, how many times shall I forgive the brother who sins against me?" He adds in a loud voice, so that everyone can hear, "Seven times?" Peter says this smugly because he thinks that Jesus is going to commend him, because the rabbis of the time thought everyone could be expected to forgive someone three times, and they based that on a verse in the Old Testament, from the Book of Amos.

So Saint Peter doubles that and adds one for good measure. "Shall I forgive seven times?" he says grandly. But not for the first time, Jesus's answer to him is not what he expected, and Jesus's answer isn't even the same ballpark as Peter is imagining. "Not seven," Jesus says, "but 70 times seven." In other words, there's no limit to the amount of times that we should forgive our neighbor. It could be argued that this element of Jesus's teaching about forgiveness is amongst one of the most radical elements of Jesus's teaching.

Now, the key question that I'd like you to consider today is this. Is Jesus just an impractical idealist, or does this teaching about forgiveness actually work? Is it still relevant? Does it make sense? I'm not primarily interested in today's ... into the question of how we should forgive. The question that I want to answer is, why? Why should we forgive? Why should we follow Jesus's lead in this matter? If forgiveness is such a difficult, unnatural thing to do, then why bother?

Well, I've come up with three reasons. Three reasons why we should follow what Jesus says to us here on this matter, and why we should forgive. The first is this. We forgive because we ourselves are forgiven. As Christians, we're a forgiven and a forgiving people. There was a Catholic priest in the Philippines. He was much loved in the parish, but he carried in his heart a secret of a sin that he'd committed when he was in the seminary. He could find no peace, no forgiveness from this perceived sin against God. There was a woman in the parish who had visions, who actually got on his nerves by coming to her with her visions. He said to her once, when she came with a vision, he said, "I'll tell you what, if you are so in touch with God and you have these visions, ask him to tell you to reveal to you what I did in seminary." So the woman said, "Okay, I'll do that." So he saw her again the week later and he said, "So, did God give you an answer to your question? Did you get a vision?" She said, "Yes." So the priest was intrigued

and said, "Well, what did he say?" The woman said, "He said he didn't remember."

That's what we need to know about God, that God forgives. God does not remember the sins that we have committed. His forgiveness is complete and unconditional. In the parable that Jesus gave in answer to St. Peter's question, he's clearly saying that God, our Father, is the merciful King who forgives the servant at great cost to himself, which is how the Bible invites us to understand the cross of Jesus Christ. Our forgiveness is one at the cost of Jesus's self-sacrifice on the cross. It's because of our deep conviction that we are a forgiven people, that we can face up to the seriousness of the sin which ensnares us, and we recognize the cost of the forgiveness that Jesus has won for us on the cross. Forgiveness isn't denial. Forgiveness isn't sweeping things under the carpet. The possibility of forgiveness that we know through our relationship with God and in the teaching of Jesus allows us to acknowledge the reality of sin and injustice in the world. We can face up to it because we know that, in God, there is complete forgiveness. We can name sin for what it is because we have experienced the power of forgiveness. We are all forgiven by a God who loves us and forgives us unconditionally.

The second reason to forgive is this. If we don't forgive, if we choose not to forgive, then we're enslaving ourselves. There's an old Chinese proverb, "Whoever opts for revenge should dig two graves." It's better to forgive and smile than remember and be sad. There's a great story of forgiveness told by Corrie ten Boom, who was in a concentration camp in the war. A few years after the war, she had an encounter, or she was sought out by one of the guards in the camp who she remembered as one of the cruelest, most vindictive guards that there were. The guard came up to her, as I say, he sought her out and recognized her. He stretched out his hand and said, "Will you forgive me?"

Corrie ten Boom writes this about her response. "I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I know that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. I prayed. Jesus help me. Woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me, and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started in my shoulder, raced down into my arms, and sprang into our clutched hands.

"Then this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother,' I cried with my whole heart. For a long moment, we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God so

intensely as I did at that moment. To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover that the prisoner was you."

In A Christmas Carol, Marley's ghost says to Scrooge, "We mustn't drag the chain of the past with us wherever we go." Forgiving someone breaks the chain. Forgiveness is liberating, not just for those who are forgiven, but also the one who is doing the forgiving. Too many people are eaten up by bitterness, and the message in the gospel today is, let it go.

The third reason to forgive is actually the one I find most compelling. We should forgive, because what's the alternative? The simple truth is that unforgiving is not as good as forgiving. I don't know if you've heard the story. There are two men that go around San Diego to the schools, giving an amazing talk. One of them is the father of a bright young boy, who, before he went off to college, was working as a pizza delivery boy. He arrived at a house one day, and he opened the door, and he was shot and killed because the people who'd ordered the pizza didn't want a pizza. It turned out that it was a gang killing and it was a setup. So one of the youngest members of the gang, to be admitted to the gang, had to kill someone. He sadly killed the boy delivering the pizza, and he was found and spent many years in prison. The pizza delivery boy's father and the grandfather of the boy who did the shooting contacted each other, and became friends, and shared stories. They both realized that they commiserated with each other, they'd both lost a boy, and a strong bond was made. They actually, as I say, go around San Diego telling an amazingly compelling story about the power of forgiveness and the fact that it is simply the best thing to do, because the alternatives aren't as attractive or as compelling.

Yes, it sounds schmaltzy and hopelessly idealistic to forgive, but really, what's the alternative to forgiving? Show me a better way that doesn't involve a large element of forgiveness. So I'll leave it there. Three reasons to forgive. One, we are ourselves forgiven. Two, forgiveness frees us from being slaves to the past. And three, there is no better alternative. Amen.