

Yr. A, Proper 19
September 13, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1538 Words

Lessons: Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:1-13
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

“How often should I forgive?” asks Peter. “As many as seven times?”

Well, that sounds like a generous plenty to me. Only the most dim-witted person could fail to anticipate the eighth trespass by someone who has gotten away with seven, already.

Jesus...has a different idea—“not seven, but seventy-seven!” You see, Jesus knows something you and I will not admit: As long as you’re counting, you’re not really forgiving. As long as you’re keeping score, you’re not really letting go of your resentment.

Forgiveness begins as a transformation within oneself. You either accept God’s transformative gift of peace, as Joseph did so powerfully in our Old Testament story; or you just keep on keeping score, as the wicked slave did so selfishly in Jesus’ story.

Forgiveness is about settling the heart. Vengeance is about settling the score.

So, how often should we seek to settle our hearts about grievances from our past? Is seven times enough? You tell me. How much heart damage do you want to hold onto? How much vengeance will it take to give you peace?

God knows there is not enough vengeance in the world to give us peace, which is why the LORD says, “Vengeance belongs to me. I will handle the repayments.”¹

“O God, without you we are not able to please you. Mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.”²

Imagine a nation deeply divided. That’s not hard to do, is it?

Now imagine some of the wealthiest and most powerful people looking for ways to exploit the unhappy state of affairs for their own sordid gains—politically and financially. That’s also not hard to do.

Imagine a virus, spreading out of control, claiming tens of thousands of lives, despite the best efforts of doctors and nurses. We know about this far too well.

Finally, imagine a contested presidential election—with loud and angry claims of fraud—a true constitutional crisis, requiring the U.S. Congress to step in and do something.

You don’t have to imagine these things. They already happened...during the 1870’s.

Following the Civil War, there was plenty of grievance and resentment to go around. Not surprisingly, deep divisions festered—particularly when there were vacuums in national leadership. Newly emancipated slaves watched as President Lincoln’s bold vision for reconstruction unraveled during the presidencies of his

¹ Paraphrase of Romans 12:19

² Drawn from today’s Collect.

successors. Power was returned to white Southern planters while Confederate states deprived freed slaves of their rights.

The virus was Yellow Fever. It struck the Mississippi River Valley in 1878 with a vengeance. At least 20,000 died. The City of Memphis became a ghost town because half the population fled. Death wagons were pulled through the streets. Looting and murders were common.³

The president at that time was Rutherford B. Hayes, who *lost* the popular vote in 1876, but was inaugurated the next year after his Republican allies and Southern Democrats met in secret and struck a bargain—in return for the necessary electoral votes, Hayes agreed to withdraw federal troops from the south, thereby ending Reconstruction and the federal commitment to African American civil rights.

As bad as things may seem to us now, they could be worse because they have been worse. Sometimes people dismissively say, “Oh, things could be worse,” as if to suggest we don’t need to do anything about it. That is not faithful speech. Faithful speech is saying, “things could be worse” as a call to action. Knowing that things could be worse should be an incentive for faithful people to do all within our power to make a positive difference for goodness’ sake.

And this has everything to do with having a settled heart...a forgiving heart. “O God, without you we are not able to please you. Mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.”

Don’t you see how this *is* the story of Joseph? His brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. He accepted the transforming gift of God’s peace within himself, and emerged from slavery to become the 2nd most powerful person in the land. Things could have been worse, and then they were. A widespread famine struck the land.

One day those detestable brothers arrived in Egypt, kneeling down before Joseph to beg for mercy. Finally, the tables were turned. They were ready—even eager—to become his slaves. But Joseph had a settled heart, thanks be to God. He knew there was not enough vengeance in the world to give him peace, and so he gave his brothers food.

Remember, forgiveness begins with a transformation within oneself. Through the transforming power of God’s Holy Spirit, Joseph already had a settled heart. So, he had no need to settle the score. He had the heart to glorify the LORD, who—in the words of our Psalm—is a LORD full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. Joseph was able to glorify the LORD by imitating the LORD. He blessed his brothers, and their little ones, because his own heart was full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.

“O God, without you we are not able to please you. Mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.”

Three hundred years after King Henry VIII closed and looted the monasteries of England, the first formally constituted Anglican monastery in North America came into being inside St. Michaels Episcopal Church in New York City. It happened on the Feast of the Presentation, just two months before Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Virginia.

³ These and subsequent details about Constance and her companions, the Convent of St. Mary, and Memphis during the epidemic of 1878 are drawn from Fr. John Julian, OJN, *Stars in a Dark World: Stories of the Saints and Holy Days of the Liturgy*, (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, Inc., 2009), p. 500-503; and from *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints*, (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2010), p. 570.

The Community of St. Mary had its mission in New York—a home for poor women, a hospital, a school, and an orphanage for children. Two years later a miracle happened. Bishop Charles Quintard of Tennessee asked the Sisters of St. Mary for help rebuilding his diocese after the Civil War.

Some of these women from New England, whose family members and neighbors fought for the Union Army, (they) came south to care for the orphans of dead confederate soldiers. These women were not keeping score; they were keeping the faith. And they were led by a young, 28-year-old woman named Constance.

She and her sisters had great success for years, until the Yellow Fever epidemic hit Memphis in August of 1878. Many doctors fled the city, as did most clergymen. The streets were covered in powdered lime; and sheets, soaked in carbolic acid, were hung around sick rooms. The Sisters of St. Mary bravely cared for the victims of the epidemic, including those who were abandoned by their own families. The Sisters of St. Mary offered physical and spiritual care to the dying in their final days and hours.

When Constance and another sister were stricken with fever on September 5th, they refused to use the one remaining mattress in the house for fear of contaminating it, so they lay suffering on the bare floor. The dreadful truth nobody knew is that the disease was not contagious by touch or breath, as everyone feared. It was the mosquitos.

The next day, September 6th, Father Charles Parsons, rector of Grace Church, chaplain of St. Mary's convent, and the last Episcopal priest in the city had to read his own Commendation Prayers at the time of death. His last words—"Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit." Constance died three days later, on September 9th.

This past Wednesday was the annual Feast Day which commemorates the Martyrs of Memphis, Constance and her companions. We celebrate their witness because these saints reveal the depth of strength and courage that is possible for faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Constance and her companions are a witness to the healing power of God's love, flowing through the settled hearts of ordinary people. The Martyrs of Memphis were able to glorify the LORD by imitating the LORD—full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.

No matter how much anger and resentment is fomented from the highest, most prestigious offices in government, business, the media, or anywhere else; the call for followers of Jesus Christ remains simple, challenging, and constant. We are called to forgiveness, which means accepting the transforming gift of God's Holy Spirit, and choosing to live with settled hearts.

We are called to the kind of justice, mercy, and humility that are possible for people who accept the peace of God which settles the human heart, and then share this peace with others. We are called to pray for this kind of justice, mercy, and humility in our hearts. We are called to speak for this kind of justice, mercy, and humility in our communities. We are called to act with this kind of justice, mercy, and humility in our lives.

All the vengeance in the world will not give us peace. All the settled scores in the world will not give us peace. The only lasting peace is the peace that comes from opening our hearts to the transforming love of God in Christ Jesus.

"O God, without you we are not able to please you. Mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts."

Amen.