

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35

"Forgiveness"

Last week I spoke to you about Jesus' prescription for a troubled relationship – meaning His words from the Gospel of Matthew chapter 18 beginning at verse 15. Jesus says *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."* (Matthew 18:15) This is to be done in love and not in a judging or convicting way – lauding it over that person. Jesus goes on to say what we are to do if that doesn't work: *"But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" (Matthew 18:16)* not only is there safety in numbers – but there can also be wisdom and prayer. Notice the word witnesses. A witness tells what they have seen – hopefully truthfully. People who can offer their caring and love for both people – that is why two or three people. It is not choosing sides – it is telling what took place. Then what? If that person just won't listen – Jesus gives His last-ditch command. I think everyone in some point in their lives has come across a person – an individual that wants everything their way. They are never wrong – like Sheldon on the Big Bang Theory TV show. Do you know a 'Sheldon Cooper' who is never wrong? But here is what Jesus said: *"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."* (Matthew 18:17)

Jesus speaks of the importance of relationship – which should mean everything to people of faith - and not only our relationship with our Savior, but our relationship with each other. The word relationship means 'a state of being connected' – the way in which two or more people regard and behave toward each other. At the beginning of every service I share with you the words of Jesus in which He said: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."* (Matthew 22:37-40) With this perspective in mind – God wants us to be very intentional in our relationships with Him and with one another. It has always been His intention for us to spend time with Him – and with one another. Just take a look at the Ten Commandments and you will see that the first four Commandments are expressly about our relationship with God Himself (vertical) – and the last six are about people dealing with and respecting people (horizontal). God told Moses in Exodus 20:1-17 *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."*

1. *Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*
2. *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.*
3. *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.*
4. *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.* – And even this fourth Commandment was given more for mankind. Jesus even said *"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."* (Mark 2:27-28) God wanted us to take the time to take the rest – so that we can more effectively interact with Him and one another.

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 17, 2017, Year A

The last six Commandments are about relationships with other people:

5. *Honor thy father and thy mother.*
6. *Thou shalt not kill.*
7. *Thou shalt not commit adultery.*
8. *Thou shalt not steal.*
9. *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.*
10. *Thou shalt not covet.*

Notice that the first three and the last five are telling us what NOT to do. It doesn't get any clearer than that – think about teaching a young child to stay away from the hot stove – we tell them “hot” and that translates quickly into “not.” Yet, how many kids still do what they are told not to do – and then translate that to adults?

Jesus tackles this in Matthew chapter 18 – and in this week's Holy Gospel – He addresses forgiveness – head on. Peter asks the question “*Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?*” Jesus answered, “*I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times*”. (Matthew 18:21-22) Peter is purposely using the number of perfection, the number of completion, God's number, ‘seven’ in asking Jesus how many times to forgive – suggesting an infinite number of times. Jesus' answer has been a point of much discussion over the years. Some translations of this Gospel verse see the Greek phrase ἐβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ (heb-domay-kontakis hepta) as the literal ‘*seventy times seven*’ while others take the word ‘hepta’ which means seven and then placing the adjective heb-domay-kontakis which means seventy times after the seven – and so see it as ‘*seventy seven times*.’ The important thing to see here is that Jesus' response pushes way past that thought - to make it **ultimately a number too big to keep track of**. Seven is God's number –and so Jesus is asking us to once again express the unconditional ‘agape’ love – the kind of love that God has for us – and giving us time to repent on our own. Such a big number!

Jesus gives us a parable of an unforgiving servant. Before looking at the parable – I think we need to understand what kind of money is being used here. The NIV reading this morning used bags of gold instead of the money in the text with drachmas and talents. This servant owed ten thousand talents to the king. One talent was equal to the Greek value of 6,000 Drachmas or Roman Denarii. The Drachma was equal to about a day's wages, and it would take the average servant or laborer about 20 years to earn one talent. And so, ten thousand talents would equate to the lifetime earnings of several good-sized villages. We are talking about a boat load of money! This man that Jesus was talking about was forgiven a debt of 60 million drachmas. That is a lot of money, and you wonder how he built up such a debt?

In the parable the king hears the cries for mercy from this servant to not put him, his wife and children up for sale – into slavery – and forgives this massive debt. This servant now makes a ‘b-line’ to find a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii and begins to choke him, demanding repayment – and has him thrown into debtor's prison. Compare 60 million drachmas to 100 –

and the fact that this servant who received mercy could not show the same mercy to another person. When the king learns of this – he has the unforgiving servant arrested and beaten until he can repay all 60 million drachmas. This is how Jesus compares our own sin against God with the sins that others commit against us. Jesus ties this all together by saying *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."* (Matthew 18:35) There is no hope of forgiveness unless we forgive. Jesus in teaching us how to pray said this in what has become the Lord's Prayer: *"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."* (Matthew 6:14-15) We say *"forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."* This is not a condition – this is a truth! How is it that Almighty God is willing to forgive us – but many are not willing to do the same for others?

Life is all about relationships, and I started reflecting about sincere apology and forgiveness in relationships. You know when I officiate at a wedding I have always reminded the couple, and those present of twelve very important words. These words are not just for weddings and the married couple – but they are also very important in any relationship. The twelve words are:

- I am sorry
- I was wrong
- Please forgive me
- I love you.

Twelve words that bare the soul and humbly ask for forgiveness. Why? Because of love. You have got to admit that these words carry a lot of weight.

There are more words that are often heard at weddings – but Paul wasn't speaking to people getting married when he wrote these words – he was speaking about Christians in relationship with others. These words are not about weddings – they are about Christian relationships. The people in Corinth were really messed up. They were making all sorts of mistakes – kind of like when you watch the news today. He wrote to the people of Corinth how to treat each other in love- agape love. He wrote: *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."* (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

If you take nothing else with you today – please take the twelve words:

- I am sorry
- I was wrong
- Please forgive me
- I love you.