

Rev. Lisa Schrott
September 17, 2023
Genesis 50:15-21 & Matthew 18:21-35
Building a Network of Care and Shalom

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your sibling from your heart.” **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

When I was in high school, the church I grew up in – Christian Community Presbyterian Church in Bowie, MD, did a production of *Godspell* every summer. For those who have seen the play or movie, you know it is a pretty faithful enactment of the Gospel of Matthew. A number of my friends were performers in the show, so I ended up seeing it many times each summer. And while there are certainly many songs and scenes I have memories of, the enactment of this parable is one of my most vivid memories. When you hear this parable read as I did from the NRSV you hear a lot of he/him/slaves and it can be hard to keep track of what is going on. Hear now this parable again, a bit simplified but how I remember it from my *Godspell* days:

Julie, an entrepreneur, wished to settle accounts with her workers. Julie summoned Kathy who owed her 720 million dollars. Kathy couldn't pay back this debt (some back Crypto investments). Julie ordered Kathy and her family to sell all of their possessions, and agree to give all their future money to her. Kathy pleaded with Julie, saying she would try to repay her in time. But taking pity on Kathy, Julie released her from her debts and sent her on her way.

When Kathy left her workplace, she happened on her co-worker Kevin who owed her \$1500. Kathy accosted Kevin and insisted he pay what is owed. Kevin pleaded with Kathy – give me a chance and I will pay you. But Kathy refused and had Kevin thrown into prison. Kevin and Kathy's co-workers saw this whole encounter and could not believe what they had seen. They told their boss Julie who promptly summoned Kathy who reminded her, not so gently, that she had forgiven her 720 million dollar debt. So should she not forgive the \$1500 owed by Kevin? So Julie had Kathy handed over to the authorities.

Seeing my friends Julie, Kathy, and Kevin act this out night after night made a big impression on me. I knew that forgiveness was important, after all I grew up asking God to “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” in the Lord's Prayer each Sunday. And yet it was the enactment of it by friends that made me appreciate the absurdity of the scale of forgiveness we have been granted by God, and that we are asked to extend to others.

The story of Joseph forgiving his brothers that you heard Ellen read in our Old Testament lesson this morning is likewise so extreme that it, too, borders on the absurd. Earlier this summer we heard about the birth of Joseph. After the ten sons and one daughter born to Jacob by first wife Leah, and by the maids Bilhah, and Zilpah, Jacob's beloved wife Rachel conceives and gives birth to a son she names Joseph. Joseph became Jacob's favorite child out of the thirteen he had. There are likely many reasons for this, including that Joseph was first conceived by Rachel, the wife whom Jacob deeply loved.

The other brothers didn't get on well with Joseph – he was different – an interpreter of dreams, and they resented the special favor Joseph received from his dad. One day the brothers had had enough and decided to kill Joseph. They had bit of remorse and instead sold him off to slavery in Egypt and they lied to their father about what happened to Joseph. Fast forward many years – Joseph's ability to interpret dreams has led him out of prison and into a prominent place in Pharaoh's court. Joseph's interpretations of Pharaoh's dreams prompted the Egyptians to plan ahead for a drought, stockpiling food over the years. When drought and famine overtook the land of Canaan where Jacob and family were living, the Lord guided them to Egypt. Joseph reunited with his father and brothers, giving them land in Egypt and not just any land, the best part of the land, and plenty of food for the extended clan.

After Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers wonder if Joseph's actions were just for show, to impress their father. Or did Joseph truly forgive them? As we heard Ellen read, Joseph's brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” The brothers plead for forgiveness, saying they will serve as Josephs' slaves. But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” Can

you imagine the absurdity of this degree of forgiveness? And yet, and yet this is what God call us to do.

This is the model of shalom¹ we see played out for us over and over again in scripture. Shalom is God's basic intentions for humanity – that all people live in a condition of wholeness, wellness, harmony, integration and balance. Shalom is at the root of our personal relationships, as we see in the story of Joseph and his brothers. For Joseph to be whole and well, his family needed to be whole and well. Shalom is also at the root of our systemic relationships, and is a foundational principle in biblical justice.

Author and minister Dominique DuBois Gilliard identifies this relational emphasis of God's justice:

This rightness of relationships on every level is known as *shalom*, which is juxtaposed to the state's understanding of justice. *Shalom* calls Christians to view and pursue justice in light of God's original intent. It summons us to live within the confines of covenantal community, where we actively pursue communal flourishing, consider the interests of others (particularly "the least of these"), and prioritize the restoration of righteous relationships in the face of harm. ... God's justice moves toward restoration, reintegration, and redemption. God's justice is inherently connected to healing the harmed, restoring what has been lost, and reconciling those who are estranged from God and community. God's heart and justice are inherently restorative.²

I so appreciate this perspective of shalom – healing, restoring, and reconciling. This is hard work. It is so much easier to get worked up in a lather about the ways we have been harmed, to be filled with self-righteous indignation about the slights we have perceived, how we have not been valued, about how others have been favored over us. The humility it takes to wear the cloak of shalom does not come naturally for us. Or at least not for me.

Joseph could have demanded justice – his brothers wronged him immensely. Yes, things turned out mostly well for Joseph in the end, but he lost years of time with his father, who died just after they were reunited. So I can understand how his brothers would fear that Joseph would hold a grudge for all of their misdeeds. Ten brothers x countless harms enacted.

And Peter came to Jesus and said, "Lord, if my sibling sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

¹ Excellent brief overview of shalom in *The Little Book of Biblical Justice* by Chris Marshall. Good Books; 2005. p12-14

² Dominique DuBois Gilliard. *Communal Restoration*. Center for Action and Contemplation. August 23, 2023; Online at <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/communal-restoration-2023-08-23/>

Peter's question comes amidst Jesus teaching on how to address conflict in the community, with Jesus advising on ways to have healthy conflict resolution. I can totally see myself in Peter's shoes, thinking well that is all fine and dandy, but what if the other person continues to do wrong. How many times to I really need to forgive them before I can feel justified in striking back or ghosting them? Peter throws out a number – seven times – the number of perfection in the scriptures. I can hear the wheels spinning in his head... that guy that gives me hard time about being a fisherman, that I am uneducated and don't know every dot and tiddle in the Torah. I've forgiven him the last seven times he heckled me – this time – the eighth time will be different. I will be vindicated. As one commentator has noted:

“Seven times seems pretty generous, after all. When did you last forgive someone seven times in a row? But this only makes Jesus' answer all the more mind-bending: “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” So mind-bending is this answer, in fact, that it requires some explanation — and so Jesus offers a parable. Jesus doesn't begin by saying, “Forgiveness is like this...” or, “There once was a king...” Rather, he begins by saying, “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to...” That is, he's trying to give us a window not just into a technical question about forgiveness, but also into a whole way of life, a way of being and thriving, an entire climate and atmosphere — “the kingdom of heaven,” God's realm of love and mercy — within which humanity may unfurl into its fullest, most beautiful form.”³

Which brings us back to shalom. The kingdom of heaven is a place where the emphasis is on making right what was done wrong, restoring what had been destroyed, healing the wounds of an offensive act. It is about bringing balance and wholeness back to the community.⁴

We so desperately need a world that seeks this “kingdom of heaven.” A world that embraces both justice and mercy; embraces loving your neighbor and the common good as higher priorities than our individual liberties. We so desperately need a world that embraces shalom – God's basic intentions for humanity – that all people live in a condition of wholeness, wellness, harmony, integration and balance.

In his book about living a vulnerable faith, self-described writer, activist and community misfit, Jamie Arpin-Ricci notes that “Shalom is what love looks like in the flesh. The embodiment of love in the context of a broken creation, shalom is a hint at what was, what should be, and what will one day be again. Where sin disintegrates and isolates, shalom brings together and restores.”⁵

³ *Beyond Measure: SALT's Commentary for the Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost*; September 11, 2023; Online at <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/9/7/beyond-measure-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-fifteenth-week-after-pentecost>

⁴ Shane Clairborne, *Jesus' Work of Shalom*. Center for Action and Contemplation. August 21, 2023; Online at <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/jesus-work-of-shalom-2023-08-21/>

⁵ Jamie Arpin-Ricci, *Vulnerable Faith: Missional Living in the Radical Way of St. Patrick*. Paraclete Press, 2015.

We embody shalom in our mission statement words “We desire to build a network of caring relationships between families, friends, and strangers.” Why is this an important statement for us to make? Because

As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos,
We believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death,
We belong to God.

We desire to build a network of caring relationships
Between families, friends, and strangers

We live in a world with far too much sin – far too much disintegration and isolation; far too much broken creation. We live in a world that is craving shalom, yet we are weary and fatigued and we often don’t think we have the strength to do the work of restoration; to do the work of shalom. But we must, because shalom is what love looks like in the flesh. Because when we take to heart that we belong to God, and all of the world belongs to God, we can see how important it is to build a network of caring relationships between families, friends, and strangers; how vital it is to be a community of shalom. May it be so. Amen