

**“You gotta draw the line somewhere, don’t you?”**  
**Romans 14:1-12    Matthew 18:21-35**

Tuesday afternoon I was in the office and was told that there was a man who wanted to see the Pastor. Whenever I hear that, my defenses go up a little, so I went out to shake the hand of this man. He said, “Pastor, could I have a few minutes of your time? It will just take two minutes.” My mental calculations immediately knew that if I said “Yes” to that, the only way it would mean two minutes was if I immediately said “Yes” to what he was going to ask me, so I just stood there waiting for him to begin, which he did.

The man’s story was not unusual. It was about needing money for some work boots so he could claim a job he had secured. He didn’t have any family who could help him. I have heard a lot of these stories and have become expert at saying “No” to them. I know the wisdom of good boundaries, the foolishness of just handing out money. It is important to draw a line between helping people and just giving stuff away. I told myself, “You gotta draw the line somewhere.” He looked me in the eye, and I looked back at him. He said, “I am appealing to you as a man of God to a man of God.” But I had already drawn the line that time, and so we stood standing on either side of that symbolic line. He walked away, and I bowed my head and prayed, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner! Because of the grace of God, there I go.”

I really do believe that if we don’t have the ability to say “No” then our “Yes” will not really have any meaning, but it is also true that we can become such experts at exercising our need to be able to say “No” that we will lose the capacity to say “Yes,” even when we want to. And when we lose that capacity then we are truly lost for if we do not have the ability to say “Yes” to our neighbors then how can we ever hope to have the ability to say “Yes” to God?

In last week’s gospel Jesus seemed to draw a cozy kind of line into a circle around a group of believers. He said, “Whenever two or three are gathered in my name I am there among them.” But today’s gospel quickly reminds us that this is not just a cozy circle of fellowship.

Wherever two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus somebody in that cozy circle is bound to be thinking, “But we really need to draw the line somewhere, don’t we?”

As usual, Peter is the one who opens his mouth to say what the rest of us might be thinking but are too restrained to actually say out loud. Peter asks Jesus if it is permissible to draw the line at seven when it comes to forgiveness. Seven is not an arbitrary number; it is very significant.

Seven is the number symbolizing perfection, completeness, and wholeness. The story of creation is told in terms of seven days, Wisdom’s house has seven

pillars, in Revelation there are seven churches. Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus casts out seven demons from Mary Magdalene meaning she was about as messed up as you can get. Yet when it comes to forgiveness seven is not complete enough for Jesus. "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." Jesus tells Peter.

Jesus is not just extending the legal requirement for when we can draw the line on forgiveness, he is elevating the importance of forgiveness into another dimension altogether. It is the elevation from the world as we know it to the world as God wills it. Yet in his infinite wisdom God has made a decision; God has decided to not go it alone with this. God's plan of salvation is to enlist us as partners in this enterprise of transforming the world.

The story Jesus tells describes the extent to which God will go and the extent to which our choices make a real difference in this strategy to transform the world. This is not an easy, simple four point plan. Paul is very clear about what is at stake here. We heard it in this morning's passage from Romans:

14:7-9 "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living."

Jesus tells a story where things are turned upside down several times. It begins in the world of calculation and control. The economy was in a bit of a downturn; the king was looking at his cash flow and said to himself, "Hmmm, these figures don't look as good as they used to. I need to do something to improve my bottom line. Ahhhh, here is a fellow who runs quite a big balance! I doubt whether he can pay off his debt but, times are tough and business is business. I will call him in and if he can't pay up, which I know he can't, I can sell him, sell his wife, sell his kids, sell his house (assuming there's any equity in it), sell his car. Every little bit helps." The king calls for the guy to come in for an appointment. This poor guy, this slave is ruined. He is as good as dead. And this poor fellow humiliates himself; he makes promises that he could never keep, it is not a pretty sight.

This is the world of calculation and control. It is not a comfortable place to be no matter which role we might find ourselves in. But then something unexpected happens. Not only is the slave as good as dead, but now the king drops dead himself. Not literally, but it might as well be because the king drops dead to the world as we know it, the world of calculation and control. Against all the advice his accountants and lawyers would have given him, had he bothered to ask, he acts on compassion and frees the guy and forgives his debt. By the king's willingness to die to this world of calculation and control the slave has the opportunity to escape the world of calculation and be born into new life.

But that is not exactly what happens. Let's just say that his learning curve leaves a little to be desired. He's not even out to the parking lot before he runs into this other guy who it just so happens owes him a small lingering debt, so he grabs the guy by the collar and starts to shake him to death to get his money out of him. This fellow is himself begging for mercy. You would think that mercy received would result in mercy given; it does not automatically happen like that.

The temptation that we all struggle with is to live our life in compartments. One compartment might be our spiritual life while another compartment is our everyday, practical life. And the temptation is very persuasive to keep the two separate, but Jesus teaches that forgiveness, reconciliation, acts of compassion are like hinges that keep all our worlds connected.

For disciples of Jesus Christ, forgiveness is not an extra. It is not an option; it is not easy; it is costly. Why is forgiveness so important?

I want to suggest three reasons why disciples of Jesus Christ need to practice forgiveness. The first is probably the least persuasive today, but the witness of scripture is that it is the most important. We need to never stop practicing forgiveness because Jesus told us to. Disciples are not above their master, and Jesus never stopped practicing forgiveness, and as his disciples we never get to the place where we can say, that's enough of this forgiveness stuff.

Why did Jesus make forgiveness central to the gospel? It is the purest and most practical way to express the generosity of love that flows from our Abba Father.

Secondly, disciples of Jesus should forgive for the sake of others. On a very practical level, we often protest by saying, "How can I forgive my brother when he is not even sorry for what he has done?" or "How can I forgive her if she doesn't repent?" There are better questions to ask, such as, "How can your brother apologize when you have not forgiven him?" or "How can your sister repent when you remain unwilling to forgive her?" If we have trouble remembering that forgiveness precedes repentance just look at the cross.

The cross is our continual reminder that forgiveness precedes repentance. When Jesus said, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" no one had repented, they weren't even done abusing him. Such love and grace disarms us. Repentance is the result of God's forgiveness, not the cause of it.

It is ironic that the same week that this gospel pops up in the lectionary we have observed the seventh anniversary of the tragedies of September 11, 2001. This week a memorial was dedicated at the Pentagon to memorialize the 184 people who lost their lives that day, both in the Pentagon and on the American Airlines Flight. I heard an interview with the husband of the chief stewardess on that flight. He said, "The idea (of this memorial) is that we want something beautiful

to come out of the ugliness and the horrificness of that day.” It is clear that much anger, anguish, and grief has been experienced, but the spiritual dimension is that unless that is released through forgiveness, beauty and goodness and joy will find great difficulty in being buoyant.

Often this seventy times seven quantifying of forgiveness is read as referring to someone who offends over and over and over, but I wonder if it could also mean that when deep injury has occurred we will have to make multiple attempts to forgive a single act of harm. Forgiveness is not a button we push once, it is an art and a discipline that asks and requires much practice.

Disciples of Jesus forgive for the sake of Christ, for the sake of others, but thirdly, for our sake as well. Simply put, forgiving is the only way to be fair to ourselves. Without forgiveness, no matter where we go, no matter what new opportunities we have we will always be dragging behind us the pains and hurts and resentments of the past. Resentments are particularly toxic. I once heard it put this way, “Resentments are an acid that inevitably destroy the container in which they are stored.” Forgiveness is God’s plan for us to be able to purge ourselves of those toxic acids.

We never outgrow our need to practice forgiveness. In fact, as the years progress I am coming to believe that practicing forgiveness is more and more vital to our relationship with God. I heard a story about an old preacher who always prayed, “Lord, prop us up on our leaning side.” One day someone asked him why he always prayed like that so fervently.

He answered, “Well sir, you see, it’s like this, I got an old barn out back. It’s been there a long time, it’s withstood a lot of weather, it’s gone through a lot of storms, and it’s stood for many years. It’s still standing. But one day I noticed it was leaning to one side a bit. So I went and got some pine poles and propped it up on its leaning side so it wouldn’t fall. Then I got to thinking about that, and how much I was like that old barn. I’ve been around a long time. I’ve withstood a lot of life’s storms. I’ve withstood a lot of hard times, and I’m still here, so I like to ask the Lord to prop us up on our leaning side, ‘cause I figure a lot of us get to leaning, at times.

Sometimes we get to leaning toward anger, leaning toward bitterness, leaning toward hatred, leaning toward complaining about other people, leaning toward plotting how to get even, leaning toward a lot of things we shouldn’t. So we need to pray, “Lord, prop us up on our leaning side, so we will stand straight and tall again, to glorify and praise God.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rev. Stephen Hoffman

September 14, 2008  
First United Methodist Church of Palmetto