



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church September 14, 2014

Matthew 18: 21-35

In the 5th Century, a monk named John Cassian introduced to Europe the form of monasticism that had been developing in the Egyptian deserts for 200 years. The monks attempted, through discipline and prayer to be Christ like, to attain to God. Cassian is recorded as saying, “I don’t need to forgive anyone, because I am never offended”. That sounds very blessed and saintly until you realise that forgiveness is just as necessary for reconciliation as repentance is. Reconciliation is a coin with two sides and last week we only looked at one side of that coin. Ignoring or overlooking the wrongs that people do is not the same as bringing people into reconciliation. It is a wonderful sign of community that we don’t punish and eject members who do something wrong, rather we ask them to see the damage they have done and be accountable for it. But even that amounts to nothing if we don’t forgive.

In some respects it seems odd that we have to be reminded of this through scripture, because I thought we were in the forgiveness business. In Christ, God has forgiven us and so, in gratitude we are called to forgive all those around us. Or is that too simple and too ideal?

It’s quite clear that the Gospel reading last week and the one this week, belong together. Matthew links them by starting the sentence ‘then’. In response to Jesus teaching the Rule of Christ about how to bring community members to account for their behaviour, Peter says “Well, how many times are we expected to forgive?” He understood that forgiveness was the other side of the reconciliation coin, but he also understood that forgiveness was a lot to ask and how much were they expected to go through. There has been a few suggestions as to his motivation for offering 7 as a good, saintly number of times to forgive someone. Seven is the perfect, heavenly number. Or, it has been suggested that in Jesus time, the rabbi’s taught that you should forgive 3 times and Peter was being generous by doubling it and adding 1! I wonder, if we counted back through Matthew’s Gospel whether Peter had already been forgiven 7 times?! Jesus response made Peter’s 7 look feeble; whether you accept either the translation of 77 or 70 times 7. He was saying, “No, Peter, it’s a number that is too big to bother keeping a record”. Rather than backing that up with a reminder about how much God has forgiven him, Jesus then tells a parable full of extravagance to make the same point.

There is no way we can read this parable in a literal sense, the details are ridiculous exaggerations. No slave could live long enough to have a debt of 10,000 talents, even an educated slave in charge of taxes or tributes could not have a debt that large. And yet, it is forgiven! Such is the mercy of God. As the Psalmist puts it, "The mercy of God extends to heaven." Some people get a bit concerned with the torture and imprisonment at the end of the parable, but shouldn't we rather be more offended by the lack of gratitude of the forgiven slave? How could you walk out of the presence of a gracious king who has forgiven you more than a king's ransom and immediately quibble over a day's pay? That is the parable's message to Peter. God has forgiven you a life time of sin and wrong and failure and yet the best you can offer your fellow community member, who has also been forgiven by God, is 7 times?

Living in a community we bump into each other and cause all sorts of hurts and offences, from minor to community threatening. And Matthew has given us the Rule of Christ to help us reconcile and revitalise the community; however that Rule of Christ does not just rest in making people own up to their faults and apologise. It rests in a willingness to forgive that is equal to and greater than the willingness to repent. Not giving up on our community members implies forgiveness, here that implication is made real. Not giving up means no limit, not just no limit to the determination to retain members, but no limit to the forgiveness and the willingness to forgive.