

Sermon for the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
September 13, 2020  
St. Michael's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Canon Michael J. Horvath  
Gospel: Matthew 18: 21-35

When I was young, at around back to school time, my mother and I would usually spend a day shopping for new clothes. And it took a while for her to understand that there were certain styles and colors that I just would not wear and there were often a few times where, in my stubbornness, we would stalemate over something she liked, and I didn't or vice versa. One of the things I remember my mother doing with any piece of clothing we looked at was to stretch and poke at the fabric. "It needs to last", she would say to herself. She understood that no matter what the shirt or trousers looked like, the fabric had to have enough integrity and strength to withstand my rough adolescent activities. The cloth had to give and stretch and bounce back, not tear so easily or pill in an unsightly way. It all depended on the fabric. It had to be forgiving through all the rough and tumble I would subject it to.

"How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered Peter, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

For Jesus, forgiveness is not something that we simply do. I think sometimes we get caught up in the doing of life. We measure our success and failures by what we have done and not done. Our sense of self can get mired in our achievements, promotions and blue ribbons. How exhausting is that?

Instead, I think Jesus is asking us to look at the quality of forgiveness. The "being", if you will, of forgiveness. Instead of looking at it as something that we do, what if we looked at it as if it is something we are. We need only look at Jesus as the model when he repeatedly says to people "your sins are forgiven". It was less a matter of his doing, than it was his very being.

If we are to follow Christ, then it must become our way as well. "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." And that's the low-end figure.

The thing about this passage is that when we hear it, we probably start thinking about who or what forgiveness doesn't apply to. Visions of people who have hurt us deeply, or the 9/11 terrorists, or Hitler, or murderers. We all have our exceptions that we want to carve out from Jesus's command to forgive. C. S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, writes "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive." And there's a lot of truth in that, don't you think? We love to think that we are forgiving folk, but how many times have we said to ourselves "I'll never forgive him or her. Ever!"?

The truth is that no one is beyond forgiveness. Thank goodness. And while it's easy to think about all the folks we can't forgive, it's just as easy to believe that we are not in need of forgiveness. The shadows move through our lives and while the hammer of judgement is as

light as a feather in our hands, we can't bear to believe that we should be getting on our knees to seek forgiveness.

In the context of forgiveness, you see, it takes three to tango. Someone must seek forgiveness, someone must be willing to offer it, and God must be appealed to in both cases. It is trinitarian in its efficacy and application. Forgiveness is not necessarily ours to give. Forgiveness may not be ours to receive. But through God's grace we can share both God's gift of forgiveness with others and receive God's gift of forgiveness with gratitude and true repentance.

Like the shirt fabric my mother would pull and poke at, the integrity of our lives depends on our willingness to bend, to be stretched, sometimes to be torn, with the hope and grace that forgiveness will bring our relationships back into shape.

It may not feel good to forgive, and we may be forever damaged and never fully mended. But living as someone who forgives in the name of God points us toward the fact that eventually it is the relationship that matters. You see, in order to forgive we need to bend a little, to soften a little. We need to humble ourselves a little. Some might think that humility is necessary only on the part of the person who seeks forgiveness, but we should be humbled by the fact that each of us is always in the need for forgiveness and it is a divine gift to share God's forgiveness.

That's what makes the fabric of our relationships strong. That is what prevents the fabric of our communities from being pulled apart. Think about how your life might be different if you didn't have to carry the anger or resentment against those who hurt you. Think about how fully you can live in a community and be part of its joys and sorrows if only you could bend a little, soften a little, humble yourself before God a little. This is the essence of our life together. It determines the strength of the weave of the fabric of our community.

We may call today our Welcome Back Sunday, but Welcome Back happens every time we say to God and to one another "I want to weave my life, my experiences, my being with yours." Welcome Back happens every time we forgive others. Welcome Back happens every time we commit ourselves to the emotional and spiritual well-being of our community. Welcome Back happens every time we return to the loom with the understanding that one solitary thread is not enough to clothe the Body of Christ.

When people reminisce about churches and faith communities they love, it's usually not about particular things that people did or what their role was in the church. We usually remember how they made us feel at our most vulnerable times.

When I think of my favorite faith communities, I remember those who were present to the grief of others. I remember those who congratulated our children and grandchildren when they graduated from high school; who prayed with each other before some surgery or medical procedure. I remember those who greeted newcomers at the door with a kind "Hello!". Those who showed up to volunteer, not because they needed something to "do", but because they were seeking a relationship where they might experience God and be truly seen by others. I

remember these people because something about our time together allowed us to bend, to soften, and to humbly realize that God was in our midst.

And just like any hand-made fabric, the fabric of this community at St. Michael's will continue to take shape. And our fabric will have to be worked again and again, taken apart, and sewn back together with forgiveness and humility. It's a lot of work, but I promise you that the tapestry of grace and love and fellowship that can be woven into this community will keep you warm on the coldest of nights and dry on the stormiest of days. But, as my mother would say, it all depends on the fabric and how much of ourselves we are willing to weave into it and into one another's lives to make it as strong as possible. Amen.