

## What Goes Around Comes Around.

*A sermon preached at Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.*

*17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 19, Yr. A. Roundup Sunday. (Text: Matthew 18:21-35)*

We all know the Lord's Prayer. Even people who don't usually go to church can say it. Maybe we know it too well and are able to say it too easily —especially the part that says, "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" ...or as the version in Matthew's gospel puts it, "*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*"

There's not a person among us – old or young – who doesn't have to deal with forgiveness in some form. Wives have to forgive husbands, and husbands have to forgive wives. Parents have to forgive their kids. Kids have to forgive their parents. Brothers and sisters have to forgive one another. Parishioners have to forgive their pastor, and vice versa. So the question Peter asked Jesus should be pretty important to us: "*If my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive him? As many as seven times?*"

We're in the habit of imposing conditions before we'll grant forgiveness. We say (and I have heard these very words from people) "I cannot, *in good conscience*, let this person 'off' without imposing some kind of consequences." Our consciences compel us to set limits to our mercy. I can forgive once, maybe even twice. But after that, there have to be consequences. There have to be conditions. My *conscience* compels me to impose them. (Who shaped my conscience? ...Mom and Dad? ...My teachers? ...My church?)

Jesus says nothing about conditions or the scruples of our legalistic consciences. He tells Peter and the others a story, and – while it's a complex parable – at least one point of it is clear. We owe God a debt that we can't pay. The Bible says we've sinned and come short of God's will for us. But God has forgiven us. That's what the cross of Christ was all about. We, therefore, should treat one another as God has treated us —with mercy and grace, demonstrating readiness to forgive unconditionally.

But: if over a lifetime of faith we're not able finally to develop a habit of extending to others the mercy that God has given us, then on the Day of Judgment we might find our own pardons withdrawn and a penalty demanded. In the Sermon on the Mount, after Jesus gives the disciples the model prayer that we call the Lord's Prayer, he says quite clearly [Matt. 6:14-15], "*If you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your offenses.*"

Listen to the voices around us in our culture. Voices say: "We want justice." "We believe in law and order." "Punishment should fit the crime." This sounds right and good to us 'til *we* happen to become accused offenders —'til *we* get stopped by the police for a traffic offense, or *we* get nailed for failing to follow through on a commitment, or *we* have a loan called by the bank and can't raise the money to pay it off. When that happens, we want mercy. We want understanding from the traffic cop or the judge. We want patience with our failures. And – please! – give us a second chance. When *we're* the offenders, it's amazing how clear the extenuating circumstances are... how understandable our failures are... how obviously forgivable it all should be.

Forgiveness is not instinctive. It's not an innate human reflex. It doesn't come naturally to us. No. Vengeance, retribution, violent response to an attack —*these* are the natural human qualities. And so, because forgiveness *is* un-natural, we have to *work* at it. We have to practice it regularly like any other spiritual discipline, 'til it soaks down into our souls and softens our hard, judgmental, vengeful hearts and re-shapes our consciences.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said “Forgiveness is not just an occasional act. It’s a permanent attitude.”  
Gandhi said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.”

From the cross, Jesus looked down at those who were crucifying him, and not just at the Roman soldiers who were merely doing their jobs, but at all those people standing around on the hill of Golgotha – those “good people” who really, truly thought they were doing God’s will by punishing a terrible blasphemer, and he said, “*Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they’re doing.*”

People who understand, deep down in their hearts, that they are offenders who have received forgiveness, hopeless debtors whose debts have been mercifully cancelled, these are the people who are strong enough to practice forgiveness and extend mercy to others.

Don’t we all know the saying, “What goes around comes around”? It’s a principle, almost a law of nature. We pass along to others what we ourselves have received.

I want to conclude by reminding you of a famous story that many of you will remember. It’s from *Les Miserables*. If you never read the novel, you may well – like me – have seen the stage production or the movie. Even kids who have never heard the story before get the message loud and clear. In *Les Mirables* the main character is called Jean Valjean. He’s a man who served 19 years at hard labor, breaking rock in a prison quarry for the crime of stealing a loaf of bread in order to feed his sister’s hungry family. Finally, he escapes. Now in his forties, he’s full of hatred and resentment for having been forced to spend his youth as a prisoner for something so petty as stealing a loaf of bread to feed a hungry child.

As he trudges homeward across the French countryside, nobody will give him a place to sleep for the night. His rough appearance and prison clothes make him look untrustworthy. The farmers and townspeople are afraid of him. Finally, worn out and starving, he goes up to the door of a grand house and knocks. It is the home of the local bishop. The housekeeper is very wary, but the old bishop insists on bringing Jean Valjean in. He seats him at his own table, gives him a fine meal, and puts him in a guest room for the night. Jean Valjean rewards the bishop’s kindness by pilfering the episcopal silverware and making off before dawn.

Soon he meets two gendarmes on the road who recognize him as an ex-convict and insist on searching him. (No Miranda rights in 19<sup>th</sup> century France!) They find the bishop’s silverware and recognize the coat of arms on the handles. But Jean Valjean lies and tells them that the Bishop gave him the silver.

The gendarmes don’t believe him, and they take him back to the bishop, so the churchman can identify the thief who stole his silver. However, the bishop, instead of identifying Valjean as a thief, agrees with his false alibi. He says to the policemen, “Yes, of course I gave him the silver.” Then he goes into the pantry and comes out with two big silver candlesticks and thrusts them into Valjean’s bag, saying “Here! I gave you these also. —Did you forget them?” He assures the policemen, “This silver was my gift to him.”

Jean Valjean is forever changed. From that moment, his life is transformed. He goes on to extend mercy to an orphan child and raise her as his own daughter. He forgives a vicious policeman who has devoted his career to recapturing him and sending him back to the prison quarry so that “justice” will be served. In the end Valjean dies, holding in his hands the two silver candlesticks the bishop had given him.

What completely transformed this bitter man? He learned to extend mercy to others because mercy had been extended to him.

What goes around comes around!