

How Many Times

Matthew 18:21-35

September 17, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

I love this eighteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel...particularly this parable we read. We all like the story. Oh, but it is difficult to apply to ourselves.

This eighteenth chapter is about forgiveness and restoration. We are first told that we had better not be the ones to cause another to sin. Then Jesus told the story about the one lost sheep. A man has one hundred sheep and one wanders off and he leaves the other ninety-nine to fend for themselves and goes and looks for the one lost sheep in order to restore that sheep to the fold. Jesus then said that if we perceive that one has sinned against us, we are to go directly to that person—not to everyone else, but to that person—and attempt to make things right...to restore the relationship. Some pretty straight forward teaching right there.

It was in response to that teaching by Jesus that Peter asked, “Okay, I go to my brother who I perceive has sinned against me. But how many times do I have to do this? How many times must I forgive? Seven times seems like a reasonable number to me.” Seven...you know that so-called perfect number...for those who are into numerology, which I am not.

I am not going to get too much into most of the standard lessons in this text. We know it is about forgiveness...and how we are supposed to forgive...always forgive. But this whole forgiveness thing just is not that easy. Let’s be honest about this. It can be downright difficult to forgive some folks of some offenses. Nowhere did Jesus ever say this is easy. In fact, the gospels contain few instances of the word “easy” ever

proceeding from the lips of Jesus. He once said his burden was light and easy, but that was a reference to grace and mercy being more superior to the heavy yoke and burden of the law. You know what Jesus did say was easy? He said the gate was wide and the way easy that leads to destruction. So forgiving another can be difficult. We are still to do it.

Also, a few weeks ago, we looked at chapter sixteen of Matthew’s Gospel. Peter made his confession of Jesus as the Messiah. The Church is built on that confession. Jesus then extended the invitation to those who would go with him from that point on. Those who wanted to continue the journey with him were to deny themselves and take up their own cross and follow Jesus. This is the same invitation to which we have responded. In other words we walk in the steps—in the way—of Jesus. Those steps—that way—is the way of the cross. At the cross Jesus forgave. He forgave even those who nailed him to that cross. The way of Jesus is the way of grace and mercy and forgiveness. Early followers of Jesus were also called people of the way. They walked in the way of Jesus. Grace. Mercy. Forgiveness. There is no way around that.

Let me just throw in this random thought here. People often ask if they have to forgive a person who does not come to them seeking forgiveness...if the person thinks they have committed no offense. All I have to say to that is: Jesus said, “Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing. Father forgive them. They do not know that what they are doing is wrong.” Those pounding the nails did not tell Jesus they were sorry. They did not seek forgiveness. They gambled for his robe. There were others who issued not one word of apology or regret. They hurled insults. I wonder if there are any sins I have committed for which I did not seek