

Matthew 18 v 21-35 The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

So, sin and what to do about it? So, how many times should I forgive you when you sin against me? So how many times should you forgive me when I sin against you? Why is it that we need to hear this message? Do we find it difficult? If we do why is that?

When I started to think about this I first went for a definition of sin. I found this one in a book by Dr Carl Menninger titled Whatever became of Sin.

“Sin is transgression of the law of God; disobedience of the divine will; moral failure. Sin is failure to realize in conduct and character the moral ideal, at least as fully as possible under existing circumstances; failure to do as one ought towards one’s fellow man”.

He goes on to say. However, a sinful act is more than just non-conformity it has a wilful, sometimes defiant quality about it. It is about satisfying our own desires at the expense of others.

In the confessions we use week by week you can find in common worship you find phrases like “through negligence, through weakness, our own deliberate fault” or an alternative.

“We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things that we ought to have done; and we have done those things that we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us”.

St Augustine described it as a turning away from the universal whole to the individual part. There is nothing greater than the whole so sin at its heart is a refusal of the love of others.

So, what do we do about this sin?

In her book Speaking of Sin Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that we may have become pretty adept at sidelining sin and avoiding the subject. She says we adopt one of two languages or models to deal with it. We create theologies that seem to suit the situation.

The first being the medical model that goes something like this. The basic human condition is not sin but sickness. Everyone is vulnerable to sickness and very few people avoid being sick at some time in their lives. Since no one in his or her right mind chooses to be sick, it does not make any sense to hold sick people responsible for their illnesses.

When sickness is substituted for sin, then illness becomes the metaphor for human failing. We receive diagnosis instead of judgement, treatment instead of penance. Sometimes our problem is bacteria or sometimes some traumatic childhood event. Whichever; it cannot properly be called our fault.

We therefore do what we do because of what was done to us. It cannot be avoided. We all do the best we can. If some do better than others then that is because they were dealt a better hand to begin with. People hit children because they were hit. People do destructive things because they do not understand the how to value life, especially not their own.

This manifests itself in me through fear and anxiety the belief that I am not good enough and the hope that God will not judge my weakness.

The second suggested model being the legal model. It uses the language of the law. Here the basic human problem is not called sin or sickness but crime.

There are laws that prohibit behaviours. We are responsible for our actions. Regardless of our circumstances, we are free to avoid lives of crime and we are expected to do so. If we fail; and if we

are caught; then we will have to face the consequences. If we keep failing the punishment will be harsher.

No matter how we grew up, no matter what difficulties we may be having we are expected to abide by God's law and if we do not, to accept responsibility for our actions. So, everything is your fault and depending on what you choose you will be a sheep or a goat, wheat or tare.

This manifests itself in me in accepting responsibility for things even when it is not something I can control.

At this point you have either switched off or are feeling really bad as it is all a bit depressing. Where is the good news? These models seem to be about managing the situation dealing with the consequences. Neither approach addresses the underlying issue or allows for a bigger space a chance for transformation. I don't think this is what God wants. I think that God wants transformation God wants us to grow, he wants us to be whole.

Only God can bring about transformation we cannot do it with our own resources; as we will keep repeating the same old patterns we have learnt or inherited.

That is why it is a gift; it is grace. It is the work of the spirit.

So, perhaps this is why forgiveness is so central so important and perhaps why at the end of the passage there is such a stark warning. Remember this is Peter asking the question.

Forgiveness here is not easy; it is not about forgive and forget and to act as though nothing has happened. It is quite the opposite, it is hard. It is costly. In the verses immediately prior to today's passage, which Christine talked about last week, there are instructions about what to do if your brother sins against you, show him his fault, if he listens great; if not take two or three with you so there are witnesses and if he still refuses tell it to the church. (Matthew 18 v15-17). This is to be done from a position of love wanting to win the person back. It may well be painful and involve confrontation.

The key is that we should never give up making forgiveness and reconciliation our goal. If our heart is open and able to forgive others it will also be open to receive God's love and forgiveness. But if it is locked up to the one it will be locked up to the other. We can either help or hinder.

As far as I can work out Christianity is all about relationships. Our relationship with God and our relationship with each other. About restoration of those relationships, being reconciled, Christianity is not an individual pursuit and we need each other to check whether we are genuine and on the right track. So, we don't delude ourselves.

I'm guessing that is why the cross is at the centre of our faith; when we come and kneel, perhaps just two or three; together at its foot needing to trust fully in God's mercy and love; this is when true fellowship is experienced. We get to understand how we have wounded Christ's body and how, with our faults, we wound each other. This is a place of vulnerability where the masks come off where we have to risk being vulnerable and weak and take a chance that we might be being rejected and judged.

If we are wise and have a mature faith, we will realise we can no longer be judgmental and critical as we have become aware of the state of your own heart and what darkness there is within it. Plank and speck; cast the first stone.

Often, we try to meet each other from positions of strength talking about our gifts, blessings and achievements. This is right and good and we should encourage each other. However, meeting at a

point of weakness; I willing to be open and you willing to do the same, loving and accepting with unjudging friendship that is, when we come to the foot of the cross where we get to be on level ground where we will find healing and grace.

So, this morning, for us, on the outside does it look all well and everything is at peace and under control? On the inside is it a different story is there something that needs to be dealt with so that you can experience this love, this freeing, this transformation?

I would like to share with you a recent situation that I have experienced. Don't worry it will not be too dramatic.

Recently, at work I was in discussion with my boss when he found out that I had not been following an agreed process, a particular way of working. He was not happy. I was on a call to him that lasted for over an hour and a half during which he said to me that I was either incompetent or insubordinate and he went on to list out and remind me of all the bigger mistakes I had made over the past three years or so.

I apologised and said that this was not what I intended and offered to rectify the situation, but he was not willing to entertain this and that he would think about it and decide what should be done.

This did wonders for my self-confidence, my anxiety and stress levels and sent me on a downward spiral. I harbour him no ill will but it causes me pain. Underneath I don't think he harbours any ill will towards me either. However, it damaged our relationship which is still not back on an even keel and it may not fully recover but it is not just down to me.

Why do I share this? This is how it is (at least sometimes) in the world, to illustrate. It is not how it should be among us. I have shared more details, more history with one or two within this congregation and have been listened to, not judged, helped to see a different perspective and that before God I am good enough and helped from a dark place.

My prayer is that each of us can find someone, one or two people, who can listen without judgement and help to lead us home.

I would like to close by using some verses from Psalm 130 as a prayer.

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

If you O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord who could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.

I wait for the Lord; my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope.

My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.

O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption."

Amen