

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner  
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church  
15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 19/Year A  
September 17, 2017  
Text: Matthew 18:21-35

*“Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”*

Earlier this week I was reminded of my Roman Catholic grade school years when at least once a month each class was led over to church for the sacrament of penance or confession as we more readily called it. Sister would help us prepare for confession the day before, asking us to call to mind before we went to sleep that night what we might confess to the priest lest we stutter or forget once in the confessional box.

“Bless me Father for I have sinned. It has been (fill in the blank) since my last confession. (Then we were to list and number how many times we transgressed.) I fought with my brothers three times. I yelled at my sister one time. I was angry at my parents five times...” And on and on it went until I couldn't come up with anything else to say. I often wondered if the priest in the box would ever ask me to elaborate on any of my sins. He never did but simply told me to make the Act of Contrition (which we were to recite slowly) “O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee. I detest all my sins...But most of all because I have offended thee, my God who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the nearest occasion of sin. Amen.” Then he doled out my penance. We always returned to our seats with heads bowed. Two Hail Mary's here. Three Our Father's there. And it was all over. And as Sister said, our slates were clean until next time.

Of course, at each grade level our teacher or the priest or our own maturity upped the ante. It was not enough to rattle off our sins. We were expected to think of the consequences of our actions. And we weren't just to say we were sorry to the priest but to try to make amends to the classmate or sibling we offended. So “I'm sorry” became common words on the playground, in the classroom, and at home. That small measure of forgiveness most times helped to squash ill feelings and resentment so that

we could be about the business of learning not only our schoolwork but how to get along with others.

Today's passage comes on the heels of last week's gospel where Jesus spoke at length about how his followers are to live in community and how those who professed to be his followers were to do everything in their power to make it work. We are to let nothing get in the way of our quest for cohesiveness and community. Nothing.

In today's gospel Peter asks Jesus how far he should go with his relationship to others. How does one factor in forgiveness? Is there any magic number or limit to the number of times we should forgive a sister or a brother?

Jesus' answer becomes clear as he answers Peter's question with a parable. God's forgiveness, God's perfect forgiveness is boundless. There is no tallying up of numbers or keeping score of our sinfulness or of God's forgiveness. God forgives us endlessly as we stumble through our lives.

But there is a catch and the catch is this-as many times as we are forgiven, we are to forgive a sister and brother. Since there is no limit to God's forgiveness of us, there cannot and should not be any limit to our forgiving one another. It is not for us to tally how many times someone has sinned against us or to point fingers but we are to open our hearts and minds so that we can be reconciled with each other and forgive as we are forgiven. Not once, not twice, not even seven times but again and again and again.

This is what Jesus expects of his followers, the members of his Body, the Church. No exceptions. And by extension, this is the message that we the Church are to carry with us into the world. And yet reconciliation and community seem harder to come by these days.

The events of the last few days have challenged this posture and call to reconciliation that we are to take as followers of Christ. North Korea continues to taunt and fired off yet another nuclear missile. Yet again another child bullied brought weapons to school, killing a classmate. A biracial child will perhaps for the rest of his life, bear the marks of a failed lynching around his neck. On Friday, a bombing in a London subway injured dozens of people and a verdict here in St. Louis has opened an already festering wound, deeply dividing us once again.

And here ends most of my original sermon. I don't have adequate words that will make things better for anyone witnessing the events over the last 48 hours here in St. Louis.

I find myself as an African American clergywoman standing before you being perhaps overly cautious and not wanting to offend anyone but wanting answers because I am wondering... Wondering when and if *God's* justice, *God's* peace, and *God's* mercy will ever be realized on this side of the grave. I am wondering if and when all the one-up-man ship and all the hatred and bigotry and bullying and the pointing of fingers, and the fear of one another will cease because none of that resembles kingdom living. None of it mirrors what Jesus taught while he walked the face of this earth. I am wondering if we will ever get it in our heads that God did not create an "us and them" world. We are ALL part of God's creation called humanity. Will we ever get it in our heads that we are all uniquely made but still the same-God's beloved children? No one of us greater than or less than the other.

God, forgive me for the times I have failed. God, help us forgive each other. Help us be ONE. Help us realize that whatever affects some of us, affects all of us.

There is a song in the 'Lift Every Voice and Sing II Hymnal that goes:

*I don't feel no ways tired. I've come too far from where I started from.  
Nobody told me that the road would be easy. Lord, I don't believe you've  
brought me this far to leave me.*

And we can change that last line to say: *Lord, we don't believe you've brought us this far to leave us.*

And so I pray again the words of this morning's collect:

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.