SERMON September 13 Pentecost 16

When I first started my teaching career, in the early 1990s, I was posted to Eastern Goldfields High School in Kalgoorlie. In my third year there, there was a significant turnover of staff, as there was every two years as teachers did their “country service,” and in the Mathematics department a teacher from Serbia joined the department. This was the time of the break up of Yugoslavia, and the brutal conflict between the Croats who sought independence and the Serbs who fought it. I can remember asking my Serbian colleague about how such brutality could occur, and he told me emphatically that this was payback for what the Croats did to Serbs during World War 2.

As I approach our gospel reading today, I do so with some trepidation, well aware of the wounds that can be carried by people, families, communities where there has been a sin that has remained unforgiven, and the hurt of it has festered in people’s lives and sometimes carries through generations. Equally, I am also well aware of the wounds and hurt that might be carried by people who have endured abusive relationships, on the basis that this reading teaches that they must forgive, perhaps even reinforced by a religious authority. This is dangerous ground, and there is a need to tread carefully.

Firstly, some context. This reading occurs immediately after our Gospel of last week, which outlined a process of reconciliation, through private discussion, having witnesses and then involving the community. This passage is speaking to the Christian community, as Peter says in verse 21 when he asks how many times must he forgive his brother or sister if they sin against him. The passage is speaking about reconciliation within the community of believers, and it occurs in the context of the damaging behaviour being made public. This kind of forgiveness is not about sweeping things under the carpet and pretending that nothing bad has happened. Nor is it about allowing destructive patterns of behaviour to continue unchallenged and unchecked.

The number that Peter uses, when he asks “as many as seven times?” is generous. Rabbinic tradition allowed for three. Jesus response “seventy seven times” or “seventy times seven” (the text is not clear) is not about setting a limit on forgiveness but changing the conversation completely. It may well be that the numbers involved reflect the numbers of vengeance in the early chapters of Genesis. After Cain kills Abel and is condemned to wander, he is afraid of being murdered, and God puts a mark on him promising sevenfold vengeance on his attacker. Later in the chapter, and five generations later, Cain’s descendant Lamech kills someone and promises seventy sevenfold vengeance if he is attacked, serving to demonstrate the escalation of the vengeance cycle. The use of the same two numbers, then, demonstrates an escalation in the forgiveness cycle, of the way of thinking about reconciliation. The process of forgiveness is central to restoration of what was lost in the world by the violence of Cain, and its escalation through Lamech. Forgiveness is about a new way of being and relating, and it has impact both on the forgiven person and the one doing the forgiving.

This is demonstrated by the parable that follows, with its use of highly exaggerated imagery (one talent represented many years of wages, ten thousand- a myriad of talents is more like a national debt!) to demonstrate that all of our actions of forgiveness or otherwise occur with a shared belief in a forgiving God, to whom we owe far more than we do our brother or sister. The forgiven slave is unable to accept this new relationship that both he and his fellow slaves share with the gracious Lord who forfeits an enormous amount to be reconciled with his people and consequently experiences the harshness in his own circumstance- he is still trapped in the cycle of Cain and Lamech, seeking recompense.

None of this is to say that forgiveness is easy, particularly when the wounds are deep. There is an excellent book called “Don’t Forgive too Soon” by Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn, that outlines five stages in the process of forgiveness- Denial that there has been hurt that needs forgiveness, anger at the perpetrator, bargaining that is conditional forgiveness, self-blaming that I allowed the hurt, to acceptance that the hurt has happened and the need to find a way to heal and grow from the experience. Complete forgiveness and the healing and reconciliation that comes with it happens at the final stage. It takes the hurt seriously but separates it from its perpetrator, enabling both to live in fullness of life, free of the power that the resentment or guilt can have over their lives. It is a process of nonviolent engagement that liberates us from the damage that a cycle of retaliation and vengeance can cause, a cycle that is all too visible in the world around us. It is a process that brings our lives into truer alignment with a God who loves us and all his creation with unlimited compassion and forgiveness- ten thousand talents worth!