

September 14, 2014

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon: Forgiveness from the Heart

Text: Matthew 18: 21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?”<sup>22</sup> “No, not seven times,” answered Jesus, “but seventy times seven,<sup>23</sup> because the Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who decided to check on his servants' accounts.<sup>24</sup> He had just begun to do so when one of them was brought in who owed him millions of dollars.<sup>25</sup> The servant did not have enough to pay his debt, so the king ordered him to be sold as a slave, with his wife and his children and all that he had, in order to pay the debt.<sup>26</sup> The servant fell on his knees before the king. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay you everything!’<sup>27</sup> The king felt sorry for him, so he forgave him the debt and let him go.<sup>28</sup> “Then the man went out and met one of his fellow servants who owed him a few dollars. He grabbed him and started choking him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he said.<sup>29</sup> His fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’<sup>30</sup> But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt.<sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were very upset and went to the king and told him everything.<sup>32</sup> So he called the servant in. ‘You worthless slave!’ he said. ‘I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to.<sup>33</sup> You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you.’<sup>34</sup> The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount.”<sup>35</sup> And Jesus concluded, “That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

Today our theme from scripture is “forgiveness.” Forgiveness is an important aspect of the Christian life and we hope we can practice it as Jesus taught. As we see in the passage we read, sadly, the people who want forgiveness seem to be slow to practice it. How can we practice forgiveness in the Christian life? How can forgiveness be sincere and practiced with all our hearts? Do we have a ceremony that can help us and remind us of the need to be forgiven and be forgiving?

Teacher Siri is from Phitsantuloke near the ancient city of Sukothai in Thailand. She is a teacher at the Christian school in Phitsantuloke where I visited. Her husband is a pastor of a small local church and serves as principal of the large Christian School (Padoon Rasdra School, K-12, about 1600 students). We spent much time with this family during our two day visit. The schools I visited all over Thailand take the visit of a guest very seriously. There are usually lovely dinners and sight-seeing tours arranged. Our time there began that way too.

Teacher Siri was one of my hosts for the training seminar we conducted at her school, so she had the responsibility of taking us to lunch, to the local museum, the local famous temple, and to other “shopping” places. She insisted that we visit the ancient capital of Thailand called Sukothai. I was excited to go because this is one of the places I had hoped to visit. It is in the north of Thailand, near Burma and Laos, and is classified as a World Heritage site. You really feel you are going back in time as you visit the ancient city and walk around the quiet paths that circle stone ruins; many believe this is where Buddhism was first introduced to Thailand. There are numerous Buddha statues that invite one to pause and to ponder.

As you may know, almost everyone in Thailand is Buddhist. To be in Thailand and visit ancient or modern Thai sites, one must have a desire to meet the tenets of Buddhism. I was reminded by Siri of one of the beautiful ceremonies that is Buddhist and a big part of the Thai culture for people of all faiths. It is the ceremony of Loi Krathong which began, according to legend, in Sukothai, the ancient capital.

The words Loi Krathong translate “to float a basket.” The festival is usually in November when the weather is cooler. Families have a tradition of making baskets from a slice of the trunk of a banana tree or a spider lily plant. Modern krathongs are sometimes made of bread so the fish can eat them but are also made of Styrofoam. The practice of making them from Styrofoam has become a big problem as they pollute river and take years to decompose.

The krathong is decorated with a candle and incense sticks. Sometimes people add hair or fingernails. Often, a coin is added to the krathong as an offering to the river spirits. On the night of the full moon, the Thai people launch their krathongs in the river or a pond or some body of water. They may pray to the water spirits, asking for forgiveness for any past sins. They pray for the gods to protect them and they pray the floating away of the krathong, with the parts of themselves, will be a way to let go of any hatred, greed, anger or other defilements that have been part of their lives. It is a time to turn over a new leaf and live a better life.

Teacher Siri told me that Christians have taken this ceremony and practiced it, giving it new meaning. It is a time to light a candle and say a prayer, asking God for forgiveness and thanking God for the new life one has in Christ. What a beautiful ceremony and what an important meaning that all Thai people can share, whether Christian or Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim. This “act” of floating the krathong is a practice that is visible and marks the intention. This act of asking for forgiveness and letting go is central to the Christian life, whatever our culture, so we can see how it relates to the parable Jesus told. .

The writer of scripture tells us a story about forgiveness so we will know its importance and need in our lives. The emphasis is that forgiveness be genuine and heartfelt. When we have been intentionally wounded, according to Matthew, we should forgive and extend the forgiving grace of God to others. It would have been good for the forgiven to offer forgiveness but the story is that the one who had been forgiven of debt was quick to punish another who owed him.

Yes, this is the normal human response. Jesus wants us to think of forgiveness in terms of how we want others to treat us. In my view, Jesus taught us how to be in the “real world” of people and hard dilemmas. In the real world we have earthquakes, hurricanes, tropical storms, tsunamis, and, always, the terror of human evil and human mistakes. We have far off wars and rumors of wars and we have perennial economic woes as a result.

We have people who beg for mercy but show no mercy for others. As Christians, maybe this scripture gives us time to pause and ask how we may show unique Christian character in how we practice sincere forgiveness and let it go in our krathong. How do we get through the trials, troubles and sorrows of life and is forgiveness part of that? How do we cope, adjust to change, keep our courage and hope alive? How do we forgive others as we want to be forgiven? These are good questions for us to ponder as we think about what we would put in our krathong before we float it and send off into the water. Are we optimistic that the practice of forgiveness makes a difference?

According to what I hear, it does make a difference. Recently, while in Thailand, I heard people speak about how others see the USA. We are thought of as people who like order and believe that we can solve the world’s problems with our system of order and fairness. The new government in Thailand is called the Council for Peace and Order. They have something, I am told, that is unique to what we have in our own country: an optimism that keeps us looking ahead.

If you look at our history, this is a mark of who we are. American optimism was given birth since the 1600s. Since the 1600s, when early Congregational forebears cast the society that would become the United States as “shining city upon a hill,” the notion that one can will a better future into existence has been a central thread in our American story.

At one time, “The Power of Positive Thinking” was a best seller. American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson added his spin on optimism: “Finish each day and be done

with it. Tomorrow is a new day; begin it well and serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.”

Or, as our text, says: “Lord, if my brother or sister keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive? Seven times?” “No, not seven times,” answered Jesus, “but seventy times seven, because the Kingdom of Heaven is like this. This lesson is also about optimism and the Christian life.

We want the Kingdom of Heaven to live boldly in us as Christians. We want forgiveness to be practiced the way it was intended to be practiced. God’s providential care is among us and we are the instruments of that grace. How will the world know that Christ is living still? How will the world know that we take the subject of “forgiveness” seriously in our faith? It is in the way we treat others in the midst of pain, struggle and tragedy and instill a hope that we can change and better. This past week we remembered the tragedy, the anguish of destruction and horrific loss of life, on September 11, 2001.

We remembered and grieved again. Remembering and grieving is part of that process that leads to forgiveness so we can move on. The pain and horror of loss is still there but it does not hold us hostage. There are those we grieve in our congregation this morning. Each time we gather we grieve and we help each other live with hope that God is working in and through us to bring healing to our lives. Sometimes, this healing comes with the act of forgiveness and moving on, even when the party who has injured us does not ask for forgiveness. It is about us floating our krathong and moving on in hope and optimism.

What is your story? How do you allow God to help you with the act of forgiveness? Let’s be optimistic as we go into our future and remember that beautiful act of Loi Krathong that the Thai people practice which may inspire us. Truly, God cares for us and we lean on God to help us yet we know we must also do our part. Matthew Fox said that it is about our work in the world. It is about a role we play in the unfolding drama of the universe; it is a creative role just as the universe is constantly being creative. May it be so. Amen.

## Our Intercessory Prayer

Leader: God, our loving creator

**People: Make us care enough to trust you.**

L: Jesus, friend of all – even the outcasts, the apathetic, all those marginalized

**P: Open our eyes to see you in all creation – including the outcasts, the apathetic, all those marginalized.**

L: Holy Spirit, God's fire, make us sharers in the holiness of God

**P: Guide us in the direction of those who are vulnerable.**

L: God of grace, who creates us into a new community

**P: Warm our hearts and souls to love our neighbors as we love you.**

L: God of love, you are a wellspring of hope and compassion

**P: Give us strength and courage to be a sanctuary to those who are in need of grace and mercy**

L: God, our refuge and strength, help our congregations be places of extravagant welcome

**P: Help us work tirelessly to make changes in ourselves and in our communities that model a welcoming spirit.**

L: Creator God, with your love you support and sustain us.

**P: Help us recreate the human community to promote justice and peace for the healing of the earth.**

L: O God, pour upon us the precious oil of unity

**P: Let us move forward together with one mind and one spirit**

L: Almighty God, you have called us to feed the hungry welcome the stranger; shelter the homeless; clothe the naked; and comfort the sick and imprisoned.

**P: Help us to remember that we are an extension of Jesus Christ's ministry in the world. Give us courage to practice diakonia – the ministry of healing, service, care compassion, hospitality and forgiveness. Amen.**