

“Seventy x Seven”
Matthew 18:21-35
By Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Matthew 18 and I'm going to start at verse 21. Peter came up to the Lord and asked "How many times should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me. Is seven times enough?" and Jesus answered, "Not just seven times, but 70 times seven. This story will show you what the kingdom of heaven is like. One day a king decided to call in his officials and asked them to give an account of what they owed him. As he was doing this, one official was brought in who owed him 50 million silver coins. But he did not have any money to pay what he owed. The king ordered him to be sold along with his wife and children and all he owned in order to pay the debt. The official got down on his knees and began begging; 'Have pity on me and I will pay you every cent I owe.' The king felt sorry for him and let him go free. He even told the official that he did not have to pay back the money. As the official was leaving he happened to meet another official who owed him 100 silver coins and so he grabbed the man by the throat and he started choking him and saying 'Pay me what you owe.' The man got down on his knees and began begging. 'Have pity on me and I will pay you back.' But the first official refused to have pity. Instead, he went and had the other official put in jail until he could pay what he owed. Once some officials found out what had happened, they felt sorry for the man who had been put in jail. Then, they told the king what had happened and the king called the first official back in and said 'You are an evil man. When you begged for mercy I said you did not have to pay back a cent. Don't you think you should show pity to someone else as I did to you?' The king was so angry that he ordered the official to be tortured until he could pay back everything he owed and that is how my father in heaven will treat you if you don't forgive each of my followers with all your heart." The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Well, there's a cheerful passage for you. The last service I actually changed the way that that passage ends, and not without precedent, depending on the version of the Bible you read, it talks about the official being tortured until he could pay back or being put in prison until he could pay back, anyway, I softened it up. But, the Greek has the idea of punishment above and beyond that which prison would carry. It's a tough word. We know in our heads that we are supposed to forgive those who wrong us, that it's God place to exact judgment, that it's his to judge and not ours, and yet getting that message from our heads to our hearts, those 18 inches, can be a pretty long journey. Well, in order to help us along with that a little bit, I would like to present a story that might help us get into it a little bit.

It starts with a villain. One of those villains that we simply love to hate, only this isn't a book or the movies, it was real life and the villain was Colonel Herman Koppler who was in charge of the SS troops in Rome during World War II. As villains go, he had an impressive resume. Upon arriving in Rome, he demanded a multimillion dollar ransom for the Jews who lived in Rome. With the help of the Pope, the leading rabbis were able to raise the money in about 24 hours and paid Koppler and his SS off. But no sooner was the money in hand than Koppler, with great efficiency, started rounding up the Jews and shipping them off in railroad cars to concentration camps. It was common practice for his SS to torture and kill suspects on even the thinnest of evidence. But, what he is most known for, was rounding up 320 Roman citizens. First he started with prisoners, some of them were political prisoners, some were in for just petty crimes, others simply happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. All of these were rounded up, marched to the caves just outside of Rome and shot. A couple days

before a communist resistance group had planted a bomb that killed 32 German soldiers and in retaliation Koppler suggested to his commanding officers, that went all the way up the chain of command and got endorsement from Adolf Hitler himself, to have a 10 to 1 reprisal for that attack and he carried it out those grim orders with enthusiasm.

Despite his cruelty and no lack of trying, he had one nemesis that he could not outwit. The one man who always managed to stay just one step ahead. He knew who the man was by name, but there was a problem because he was a Vatican priest who lived in neutral Vatican territory and as long as he stayed there he was safe. But, Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty was not the neutral territory type. He was an accomplished boxer and an IRA sympathizer. He was a robust, tall, broad-shouldered man and was not content to stay in neutral territory. Another thing about him, he was an impressive golfer and had a pretty sharp wit. The years before the war he had managed to endear himself, by way of golf partners, with many very powerful, influential and important people in Rome and around that area. That becomes important in a moment.

Well, Koppler couldn't catch him but he eventually started having him followed continually and the day finally came when it seemed that O'Flaherty had run out of luck. He was cornered at the castle of Prince Felipe Doria Pamphili. Koppler had the compound surrounded, his SS troops leading the way, but many more troops circling the compound, to make sure that O'Flaherty could not escape. He came personally in his black limousine, pulled up to oversee the capture of this troublesome priest. But too much was at stake for O'Flaherty to simply surrender now. Too much was at stake for himself, for his network, and especially for the others, for Prince Felipe and others, who were compromised by his presence there. So when the troops surrounded the compound, he darted to the quickest hiding place he could find and found himself in the cellar, pitch black. But, he knew it was only a matter of time before the German troops would tear the castle apart looking for him. So, he kept groping through the dark hoping and praying for a way out. As he moved through the dark corridors of the cellar, he heard a strange sound for that place. It sounded like rocks sliding down a mountain face. So he kept moving towards the noise and as he moved on and it got louder and louder, he thought he could see the telltale signs of light and sure enough as he got closer it wasn't just light but it was daylight. Prince Felipe's winter coal supply was arriving that morning.

As he came up to the trap door and scrambled up the pile of coal, the only thing between him and the SS troops were the two coalmen but they had no love for the Nazis. Between them they hatched a quick plan. O'Flaherty stripped off his clerical hat and robes and threw it in a coal sack, tore his shirt down to the waist and covered himself head to toe with coal dust and soot. Then with the other two coal workers walked past those lines of SS troops who were sure to give these filthy workers plenty of space for fear of dirtying their uniforms. Well, he called back later that day to Prince Felipe to find out if everything was okay and Prince Phillip said Koppler was furious. But, because they did not find him he was forced to let the matter drop and the others were indeed safe.

Well, this Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty just months before could never have imagined himself in such a predicament. As I mentioned, he was Irish and grew up in Ireland and was an IRA sympathizer and so early on in the war took the reporting of German atrocities as simply Allied propaganda. After all, he had seen how cruel the British could be first hand. But, as he saw the treatment given to the Jews and

others in occupied Rome, he came to realize that the Germans had to be defeated and so he used that network of golfing partners, and others, to form an underground that was responsible for saving more Allied POWs and Roman Jews. He saved more people than any other person in World War II; over 6500 by best estimate, the largest majority of those, ironically, being British. Even more ironic, after the war he was made a commander of the British empire in recognition of his effort and the risk to his own life that he took to save so many others.

Over 50 years later, popular imagination has yet to conceive a more detestable villain and yet we could add some names to the list. But, imagine for a moment how it was, we can think of Koppler and the horrible things he did, but imagine how it was for those who first experienced; how it was for the Monsignor and others, seeing Koppler's savage efficiency. We could add names to that like Timothy McVeigh or 9/11 terrorists, but it gets personal too because the issue of forgiveness doesn't just touch those big, villainous-type characters, it gets very personal and so it might be the person in class with us or who works with us, who has talked behind our back and gossiped about us. It might be the neighbor who is a pain in the back. Or, more sadly, a parent who has not lived up to that title or responsibility. Or an ex-spouse who has wronged us in so many ways. We have good reason not to forgive, it's the righteous hatred we feel when we know that we are right and they are wrong, that they owe big time and that justice needs to be served and yet that is the heart, that's the attitude of the unforgiving servant in this passage. And we dare not soften Jesus words. He has commanded us to forgive.

There are some interesting things in that passage. Peter's question that starts the whole thing. A popular teaching among the Rabbis in that day was that three times was the number of times that you should forgive your brother in a day if they wronged you. So, Peter is being exceedingly generous saying "Seven times, Lord, is that enough?" In the Greek, if you were following along you noticed I changed the language just a little bit because it says 77 times in the CEV but the Greek actually says 70 times 7. Well, the word that Jesus uses for debt there is interesting too. It's not a common word but it is used one other place in the gospel of Matthew. In Chapter 6, Verse 12, when Jesus is teaching his disciples how to pray, Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name....forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Those are chilling words, challenging words, and for that context to be pulled in here. The other part about this context that is worth making note of is that a denari was basically equivalent to a day's wages. It was a reasonable sum of money and so the hundred denari that was owed to the unmerciful servant was not an insignificant amount of money; this was a quarter of a year's wages, it was a decent amount. And, yet, the money that he owed his master 10,000, at that time 10,000 was the largest number that you could write in the Greek language and a talent was the largest sum of money that they had and so as my kids might say he owed his master a zillion dollars. It was this kind of unimaginable, too big to be possible sum of money. What he owed was 6000 times more than what his fellow servant, or fellow slave is the word the Greek uses, his fellow slave owed him. Not that it was insignificant but compared to what he owed, it was nothing. So, how often are we to forgive? 70 times!

It's interesting, the whole Koppler and O'Flaherty story. Of course, the Germans lost, thankfully, and Koppler was sent to prison for life for war crimes, specifically the act of rounding up those 320 civilians and having them executed in retaliation for those 32 German soldiers who died. As he spent his life in prison, he had no visitors except one. About once a month a priest would come from the

Vatican out to the prison and visit him. None other than Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty on a different type of rescue mission this time. That does not mean that forgiveness is not pretending that nothing happened, it doesn't necessarily set the relationship back exactly the way it was, there are consequences for sin, but what it is it is an act of faith that turns over to God the responsibility, the task, the burden of making sure that justice is served. It is letting God be God in that situation and not carrying that burden for ourselves, not replaying the videotape in our minds of the wrong that has been done to us and reliving the hatred and the anger and the indignation. It's letting go of that for our sake, but for God's sake too. And that act of faith, that act of faith is freedom for us, but it unleashes the power of God in those situations.

And the punch line, on March 1959, Koppler sought forgiveness in the waters of baptism poured by none other than the hand of Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty. The power of forgiveness could touch even this villain. Now most of us are never going to be faced with a villain that ugly, but we will be faced with the decision to forgive or not. It's to our soul's benefit that we let God be God in that situation, that we forgive and let him work, instead of taking that responsibility on ourselves. That that whole situation, us, and the villain, might experience the grace of God. How often do we forgive? 7 times?, no 70 times 7. Endless, boundless grace. Would you pray with me.

Lord, we thank you that you have forgiven us, though it cost you the life of your son. And so in response, help us to live forgiving lives, that your grace and your love might work through our words and our actions and our relationships. that the power of your grace might be made known, even in those difficult circumstances. Give us the courage and the faith to forgive. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.