

“Yelling and Banging”
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First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Matthew 18:21-35

Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?”

Jesus said, “Not seven times, but rather seventy-seven times.

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand talents. Because he could not pay, the master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all his possessions, to make the payment. But the slave fell to his knees and said, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ And out of compassion, the master released him and forgave the loan.

But that same slave, as he went out, found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred coins. He grabbed him by the throat and said, ‘Pay what you owe.’

Then his fellow slave fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

When his fellow slaves saw what happened, they were deeply troubled. They went and reported to their master all that happened. Then his master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master handed him over to be punished until he would pay his entire debt.

So my heavenly Father will also do to you, if you don’t forgive your sister or brother from your heart.”

My brother-in-law Vince says that manners are the grease that keeps relationships – and society – running smoothly. No doubt we can all remember when some adult told our younger self, “That wasn’t nice!” or coerced us into a courtesy we didn’t feel. Today we’re invited to consider that all this politeness may, in fact, *disqualify us* from participation in creating God’s kin-dom on earth.

We’ve been reexamining Jesus’ parables this summer, trying to find old truths and notice new ways that God calls us to live them. We’ve looked at lost coins, lost sheep and prodigal children; at our pride and what holds us in bondage; people who did or didn’t use the gifts they were entrusted with; an employer who paid everyone enough to ensure all were fed; and seeds and soil. Today we start with forgiveness, but it doesn’t take long until we begin to realize that this is (again) about something else as well.

Let’s start by talking about *desperation*. For most of us desperation is so foreign from our day-to-day that we don’t consider it when we look at Jesus’ stories. Yet desperation is a fact of life for many people today as it was in Jesus’ time.

Earlier in Matthew’s gospel account, Jesus speaks of hungering and thirsting for justice, but for most of us hunger and thirst are unpleasant ideas but little more. I once hiked 20 miles on an empty stomach when I was backpacking in Yosemite. I hadn’t hung my food bag high enough the night before and bears got into it. I’d eaten well the night before though and I knew there were chocolate chip cookies in the car when I got there. Real hunger or thirst though, few of us have known.

The Law of the OT, the Law Jesus did not come to abolish, was established to ensure that both ordinary people – neighbors – and the government would consistently ensure justice for those in need or who were oppressed. Widows, orphans and strangers were those particularly addressed, because God particularly cares about them.

That’s a deeper message of the lesson [*name*] just read. We have received such an undeserved abundance of – you can fill in the blank here, but I’d say – God’s grace and love, that whatever we might share with someone else barely comes close to what is *right* in God’s eyes, who expects us to reflect the goodness that we have received. (But that was last week’s lesson, so I’ll go on.)

Peter thinks he’s doing well if he forgives someone seven times. But Jesus know this barely touches the minimum of justice we need to practice. “Think bigger. Much bigger!”

The gospel writer Luke records two other parables Jesus tells to help us appreciate both the personal and the governmental expectations of justice – one using a neighbor, the other a judge.

First though, from the OT book of Leviticus, we're reminded that justice is not optional. "If a stranger lives with you in your land... you must count [them] as one of your own countrymen and love [them] as yourself (19:33-4).

Okay, now to Luke:

"Suppose you have a friend, and you go to them at midnight and say, 'Friend, would you lend me three loaves of bread. A friend has just arrived, and I don't have anything to serve her.' Imagine they answer from within, 'Don't bother me. The door's already locked, and the kids are asleep. I can't get up and give you anything.' I really believe that even if they wouldn't get up and help because of friendship, they'd get up and give you what you need if you kept yelling and banging on the door" (11:5-8).

Remembering that from God's perspective justice isn't optional, our lives are in a sorry state when people have to yell and pound on things in order to get justice. Correct behavior would dictate the calm approach but desperation overrides niceness. Waiting until morning, or next week or the next election cycle, just isn't an option when one is truly in need.

Jesus' next words are: "So start asking... Start seeking... Start knocking." And keep doing it. It's continuous action according to the Greek. We're to yell and pound until the door is open.

We in the U.S. possess a huge portion of the world's resources. What if we see ourselves as the sleepy neighbor in the parable? What would our neighbors – nearby and far away – have to do in order to roust us out of bed?

And, if God is where we ultimately appeal for justice, God who "sees justice done... who loves the stranger and gives food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:18-9) how much more will God respond to people's requests?

Of course, in this time and place, God enacts justice through people. This parable is not about God as much as it's about you and me and about how we need to be light sleepers so we can respond promptly rather than waiting for the yelling and pounding.

If we take this parable a little further, when we have exhausted our own – and our faithful friends – resources for helping our neighbor, the next step is to go where the power is. We are called by God, who especially loves the poor and oppressed, to approach the state on behalf of our neighbors – even with yelling and pounding, if we must.

It seems that discipleship is not about being polite and quiet. Like the desperate neighbor who comes in the night, we are to make a ruckus until justice is served.

Jesus tells another parable that expands upon this call to seek justice, even as we have to appeal to our leaders. This one also comes from Luke's gospel account:

"In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice in this case against my adversary.' For a while the judge refused but finally said to himself, 'I don't fear God or respect people, but I will give this widow justice because she keeps bothering me. Otherwise, she will never stop nagging me'" (18:2-5).

There are situations for which causing trouble is our Christian witness, when for the sake of justice we need to nag and annoy. We sometimes see this in the people around us. Have you every noticed that children at their most needy make the biggest fuss? Is there someone – a spouse, a sister – who is desperate to talk with you? And you give them what they need, right? Well, most of the time, and when we don't, do these family members, students, whomever, sometimes become more insistent?

They're desperate and their desperation doesn't allow to politely take no for an answer. In the same way, sometimes our sense of compassion for another's need is so stirred that we violate the limits of politeness or niceness. But if we think about God's compassion, we come to realize that confronting others' complacency and rattling the gates of hell is part of what it takes to be a good Christ-follower.

Justice and compassion are two paths by which we draw closer to God and by which our faith is revealed. When we respond to another's desperation instead of pretending we don't notice or telling them to come back at a more convenient time, then we are living into the compassion and justice that God expects of us.

We see this exemplified in Mother Theresa and in Martin Luther King, Jr. but also in the AmeriCorps and other volunteers who came to our Fellowship Hall two weeks ago to participate in the state's Point in Time count of homeless people. It's revealed when a mother calls the city

offices to ask what we have to do to slow down drivers so that our children can be safe. God's justice and compassion are revealed when people stand up though they're quaking inside and speak to powers – about child nutrition or immigrant families or ending the stigma of mental illness.

I won't lie. This isn't easy. It's countercultural and goes against the grain of how other people would like us to behave. The state would like us quietly to go along with whatever they decide. Family and friends tell us, "Don't make waves."

But as God's children this is our call. Many of our neighbors are banging on our doors in desperation. In what ways are you living your answer?

Amen.

This sermon is adapted from Clarence Jordan and Bill Lane Doulos' *Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation*, chapter 6 "Disturbing the Peace," 1976.