



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 13, 2020
EXODUS 14:19-31; PSALM 114; MATTHEW 18:21-35

IT'S GOING TO TAKE A MIRACLE

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. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."]*

The Bible. It's a BIG book, well, a big collection of books. My precious *Oxford Annotated Bible* that was given to me by the bishop at my ordination has 2,386 pages, not including maps and index, and all those pages in the front that are in Roman numerals before the real numbering even begins. But don't worry, I'm not going to read it all to you right now – because even at 2,386 pages, at this size, I can't see the print!

When I was a child, I had a little teeny Bible, about this big (like 1"x2"). It was probably just the New Testament, but it said "Holy Bible" on the front, and it was so cute in its teenyness, I just loved it. I couldn't see the print in that one either!

But it's okay if I can't see the print, because I know the stories! Miracles! Loaves and fishes, healings, water into wine, walking on water, calming the sea, raising from the dead!

I looked up online: how many miracles does Jesus do – and the first link that came up said 33! Pretty neat coincidence, right? Another source lists 81 miracles in the New Testament.

And for the Old Testament, one source I looked at listed 67 miracles, and another 83. An all-caps headline touted the 150 miracles of the Bible. Surely, it depends on how you count them. But however you count them, it's a pretty good number. But even if we go with the biggest number they count, that's a paltry sum compared to 2,386 pages of holy scripture.

But that's what we talk about, that's what we latch onto: the miracles! The big stuff! If you were in the building with me, I'd ask you to start calling out Bible miracles to me! Do I hear someone shouting, "healing the blind man!" and "feeding the five thousand!" and "the burning bush?"

And I don't need legible print to know about the Bible story of the "parting of Red Sea" that we read today! A mighty miracle, portending so many things to unfold. It's on every single list of miracles, for sure.

But now let me ask you something: what do you think was harder for God? Parting the Red Sea, the very water that Godself created, or forgiving the people of the Exodus, who, once rescued from Egypt by this mighty miracle, in the very next chapter immediately grumble about finding water, and in the chapter after that grouse about missing the plenty of food they had in Egypt, and then in the Book of Numbers, complain that they were tired of the miracle food of manna that

God provided! So which pages in the Bible tell the *real* miracle?

I wonder.

And now, today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew about forgiveness isn't one of the miracle stories. In the chapter right before this, Jesus healed a boy who was having seizures. *That* was miracle! This Gospel passage is just one of the regular days, talking and teaching in parables. And Peter was making some progress, absorbing Jesus' way instead of the way of the world, being magnanimous. The practice of the time was to forgive three times, and then that's it! So Peter asks Jesus, how about forgiving as many as a whopping seven times? Wouldn't that show I'm getting in the swing of your message? And Jesus says, no, not seven, Peter, but seventy-seven!

Picture Peter's face. Seventy-seven! Holy cow! Who can forgive someone 77 times? *That* would take a miracle!

And there it is. The miracle of Jesus that takes place on ALL those other pages of the Gospels that don't have a "famous" miracle on them. And that miracle is this: a different way to live. A way so radically different from the ethos and laws and three-times practices of the day that it seemed like it would take a *miracle* for it to happen. But Jesus has no limit to the number of times he can forgive. Lucky for Peter, when the cock crowed, right? Lucky for you and me, on any given day. Jesus taught and showed a new way to live that embraces outrageous love, continuing forgiveness, a complete change of the world in the raising up of the lowly and

radical care for each other. That's the do-it-every-day miracle that 77 times asks for.

It's not a miracle for *Jesus*. It's who Jesus is. When we are blessed with the water of baptism parting over *us*, the miracle isn't that God loves us and claims us as God's own and will forgive us our sins and hold us throughout our lives. The miracle is that God is bringing US to participate in Jesus' new, different way to live and to do the same! That God is ready to forgive us, already knowing: we're going to complain about the manna. Knowing we're going to try split hairs and keep score so we can finally get to a limit like exactly seven times and legitimately stop forgiving our annoying neighbor with their cockamamie ideology.

Lucky for us God doesn't count that way, and that in the Bible, the number SEVEN signifies fullness, completeness. So Jesus' answer to Peter of 77 times is, as the Dean preached last week, a LOT. It is emphatic, hyperbolic enumeration for COMPLETELY, all the time. That's how often we have to have open hearts.

It's hard to keep our hearts open all the time, not only because the world can be hard, but because we can be so aware of our own failings or perceived lacking. We find it hard to believe that God loves us enough to keep forgiving us, time and again, because we have trouble forgiving ourselves. It can be our hardest work, truly. I know that. But if we believe in what Jesus came here to do on all those other "non-miracle-story" pages of the Bible, then that is a miracle that is expected of us.

Can you believe that Jesus loves you enough to forgive you – continually? If you believe Jesus went to the cross for love of us, and rose from the dead for love of us, then I beseech you to consider yourself worthy of forgiveness, time and again, worthy of God's love for exactly who you are. That is our miracle. That IS Christianity. That is why Paul writes to the Romans with all confidence those beautiful words: *For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

I don't mean just let yourself off the hook for everything, or don't repent and keep trying to do better. But if God can forgive you, shouldn't you move forward, too, with God? Forgiving yourself takes off the clamps that are constricting your heart, so your heart can be fully open to others the way Jesus showed us, and your heart can be fully open to the grace that is continually flowing from the Spirit.

We don't have to earn it. That's the miracle. It is freely given, lovingly given, continually given. Seventy-seven times. Seven times seventy-seven. Every time we seek it.

It is that open-heartedness that will see us through these divided, pandemic, hateful, fire-lashed times. The heart that feels unlovable itself, that feels unworthy of God's compassionate, forgiving grace, has a harder time being open and fully loving others – may unintentionally lash out in its own hurt. We fester into the dysfunctional society that we are seeing with a hideous spotlight right now.

How many times do we have to forgive ourselves and open to God's love? Seventy-seven times, meaning every single time we feel unlovable. Every single time. How many times do we have reorient ourselves back to Jesus' way of love? Every single time.

How many miracles are in the Bible? Count 'em up; maybe it's hundreds if you count liberally. But there are thousands of pages in our holy book where the real miracle is God among us, showing us how to live a new way. How to hang in there with ungrateful, hard-to-love people. How to forgive seventy-seven times.

You don't have to part the Red Sea! That's God's business. But you do have to work on the miracle of changing the whole world. Jesus, on all those other pages of his story, gave us the Way, to be our business. The early followers of Jesus actually called themselves people of the Way. The real miracles of Jesus are not the wonders, but the way he lived and taught us to live – a way that is completely contrary to the unforgiving, power-hungry, greedy, violent way of the culture then – and painfully now.

I look around me in this heavy, frightening time, as you do, wondering how we're ever going to find our way through the toxic smoke, and feeling like it's going to take a miracle. And it is. But here's the thing: the miracle *is* in OUR hands, it is OUR power, and it is OUR responsibility. Jesus showed us the way. And he sends us forth to miraculously change the world.

It's taking us a damn long time. But God's got eternity, and God's love and forgiveness is eternal and boundless. So we're okay. Forgive yourself and acknowledge you are beloved, every day. Let that in, so your heart can bring THAT WAY into a world so desperately needing it. We do have cause, even in these days, to be joyful and hopeful, because we know Jesus is with us all along the way.

If you can't read the fine print, don't worry – you already know the story, and it's a BIG every-single-day, re-orient-the-world miracle. Let's open our hearts and go do it!



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