Sermon for Trinity 14 Sunday 13th September 2020

In the film *Pay it Forward* released back in 2000, young Trevor McKinney, troubled by his mother's alcoholism and fears of his abusive but absent father, is caught up by an intriguing assignment from his new social studies teacher. The task is to think of something to change the world and then to put it into action. Trevor comes up with the idea of paying a favour forwards, not back; in other words, when something good happens to you, instead of returning the favour to the person who helped you, you instead pass forward the good deed by helping someone else. Trevor's efforts to make good on his idea bring a revolution not only in the lives of himself and his family, but in those of an ever-widening circle of people completely unknown to him.

Pay if Forward is a typically sentimental Hollywood film and swiftly generates tear stained faces. Yet the truth of the story is straight out of this morning's gospel reading and Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant.

At the heart of the parable is a core Christian truth: unconditional love demands unconditional forgiveness. We are the recipients of God's unconditional love and so must play that forwards with unconditional forgiveness into all our relationships.

What is startling about this teaching from Jesus is a comment that comes right at the beginning of the passage when Jesus answers a question from Peter, that is framed by Peter quite deliberately and precisely: *Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?*

In other words, Peter is asking a personal question that relates to someone he knows well, quite possibly another disciple. You can almost hear Peter inserting – *Lord, and I'm asking this on behalf of a friend, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?* Peter is asking a question about a live situation in his lived experience.

In his reply, Jesus is asking us to offer unconditional forgiveness to someone we know well, someone from within our community of faith.

This is hard; offering forgiveness to someone who remains anonymous is considerably easier. We can all offer theoretical forgiveness to the most barbaric people in history if we do not feel involved in their story; become involved at any level and the challenge mounts rapidly. Talk to anyone who has ever visited a concentration camp; the experience transforms one's understanding of the impact of those events.

The thought of forgiving the same person – someone we know well; someone from our own life experience - 490 times is mind numbingly challenging.

I wonder if you know the story of Gary Ridgway who killed 48 women in the United States. In court – and you can find the clip on You Tube - he is filmed sitting impassively as relative after relative shouts and screams at him for what he has done to their wives and daughters. And then a man steps up to the microphone and explains how Mr Ridgway – and I find it instructive how this father offers the offender the dignity of a title – has made it difficult for him to live up to his Christian beliefs, but that he is trying, and he therefore forgives the man before him for killing his daughter.

The prisoner breaks down in tears.

In a wonderful verse from Proverbs – later to be used by Paul in Romans – we read: *"If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat, if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. By doing those things you will pile up burning coals on his head and the Lord will reward you."*

That father heaped burning coals upon the head of his daughter's murderer by refusing to become yet another of his victims. In so doing, he demonstrated that evil has no hold on those who refuse to acknowledge its power.

Forgiveness, like sin, has consequences. It has the potential to liberate offender and victim and transform relationships and life's possibilities for all involved.

Yet, despite the joy that offering or receiving forgiveness brings, we often find ourselves more secure in the cul-de-sac of self-pity. Somehow, we entrap ourselves in our past experience and find the horizons of life closing in around us. If we're not careful the incident or person that has caused us pain ends up defining who we are. The light of life dims.

Our escape route from this impasse depends upon our willingness to accept and practice God's grace.

We forgive because we know we are forgiven; our ability to forgive is in direct proportion to the extent to which we know we are forgiven. So, the more we practice forgiveness, the more we experience God's grace and the stronger we become to forgive again. One only truly lives God's absolution for our own shortcomings when we practice offering absolution to others.

It is through forgiving others that we develop spiritual resilience; the ability, through our rootedness in Christ, to absorb the pains that others impose upon us. Think of this as developing a permeable thick skin; in other words, we retain the sensitivity to feel others and our own pain, whilst having the spiritual strength to withstand the blasts of others' anger, ignorance, insensitivity and injustice.

Forgiving those closest to you is hard, as Jesus' parable demonstrates. But the closest person to ourselves is, of course, ourselves, and forgiving ourselves is the hardest of all absolutions to practice.

Each of us will have a personal story that accords with this truth. Perhaps we all have things in our past to which we are not yet fully reconciled.

The way to work on this is to practice forgiving others, for through forgiveness we find healing for ourselves.

It remains my firm belief that if we don't practice forgiveness in this life and thereby reconcile ourselves to ourselves, then, as Paul suggests in the passage from Romans we heard read this morning, we will face it in the next.

Stubbornly holding on to those regrets and hurts through this life is only delaying the inevitable reconciliation with self, others and God in the life to come.

So let's get on with it now, so we are able to live this life more to the full. **Amen.**