

Hi. Welcome to St Ninian's Church in Stonehouse. My name is Stewart Cutler and it's my privilege to be the minister here.

Don't forget to like and share our services with your friends. You can catch up with our services anytime on our YouTube channel, Facebook page or on our website st-ninians-stonehouse.org.uk where you can also find out about everything else that happens.

You can also listen each week by telephone. Just call 01698 755533 for the price of a local call.

Over the past weeks we have been following Matthew's Gospel, this story of Jesus. We continue straight on from the passage we explored last week about how to sort out problem.

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, '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 should 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 should 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.'

Sermon

Forgiveness.

It's hard. Really hard.

Peter goes big in his question to Jesus. How often should I forgive? Like 7 times? He's aiming high. 7 times... that's just ridiculous. That's way beyond giving someone a chance. Why would you forgive someone 7 times.

You can imagine his face when Jesus tells him that 77 times would be more like it.

77! Why would you do that? Why would you give anyone that many chances? Why would you subject yourself to someone's bad and hurtful behaviour like that?

Remember, this passage follows on from last week and the week before. You can go back and catch up on our website anytime if you missed it to see where we started. This has been a long conversation about how to live together in community but it started with Peter finally realising who Jesus really was, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. He's rewarded by being the rock, the foundation of the church, and Peter is told that whatever he binds on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever he looses on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Those words come back again today.

This whole section from the end of chapter 16 is all about what that means. Binding and loosing. Letting go and holding on. But there is a context. Last week Jesus gave us a three step conflict resolution plan. You try... but within a context and process. Witnesses and consequences are part of that. It ends with something like 'you are always welcome here, but for now you can't stay. You will be held, but at a safe distance.'

Each day I, along with many, many others, get an email from Richard Rohr. Richard is a Jesuit priest and the author of some brilliant books. The email is his daily reflection. There are few days where his thoughts are anything less than inspiring and profound. But, even though I know that, I don't always read them everyday. I sometimes just bump past them because I'm too busy or in a hurry or just can't be bothered.

I almost did that today... and I'm so glad that I didn't. The thought for Friday 11th September comes more from someone I only recently discovered through the movie Just Mercy than from Richard. The theme for this week is restorative justice.

I'm going to share the thought for Friday with you.

Bryan Stevenson is a lawyer, social justice activist, and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. In his book Just Mercy: A Story of Redemption and Justice, he makes the case that it is distance-physical, social, and spiritual - that allows injustice to flourish. Proximity to one's neighbor - and remember, we're all neighbors according to Jesus - is what turns our hearts towards love and restorative justice. Stevenson writes about his first interaction with an inmate named Henry on death row: two men, exactly the same age, one studying at Harvard Law School, one condemned to die:

Henry asked me questions about myself, and I asked him about his life. Within an hour we were both lost in conversation. . . .

I had no right to expect anything from a condemned man on death row. Yet he gave me an astonishing measure of his humanity. In that moment, Henry altered something in my understanding of human potential, redemption, and hopefulness. . . . Proximity to the condemned and incarcerated made the question of each person's humanity more urgent and meaningful, including my own. . . .

I've also represented people who have committed terrible crimes but nonetheless struggle to recover and to find redemption. I have discovered, deep in the hearts of many

condemned and incarcerated people, the scattered traces of hope and humanity - seeds of restoration that come to astonishing life when nurtured by very simple interventions.

Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done. My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice. Finally, I've come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.

We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others. The closer we get to mass incarceration and extreme levels of punishment, the more I believe it's necessary to recognize that we all need mercy, we all need justice, and - perhaps - we all need some measure of unmerited grace.

77 times speaks of that measure of unmerited grace.

But that is no easy thing.

Remember, the writer of Matthew's Gospel, this story of Jesus we have been working through, tells us that Jesus has come to perfect the law, not to do away with it. Jesus wants to show us how to live out the law to its fullest, where instead of punishing those who kill we seek instead to make peace before anyone is harmed.

To do that is costly, and risky and often painful.

It requires us to give much of ourselves. As Bryan Stevenson discovered, to truly have justice we must open ourselves not only to those who have been convicted but to our part in creating a society which allows the imprisonment of fellow humans in situations that if we were faced with them would appall us.

Stevenson is a lawyer. He understands that part of sentencing is punishment. That people who have done wrong should expect some form of punishment. Jesus says exactly the same. The wicked slave in the story is handed over to be punished... but he is punished because he had no mercy, not for asking that his debt be repaid.

A lack of proximity allows us to talk about people running away from war, famine and extreme poverty as 'illegals'. People aren't illegal. Crossing the English Channel, the busiest shipping lane in the world, in a plastic dinghy isn't illegal. And just to clarify, seeking asylum here isn't illegal either. We can only make statements like that when we are so far removed from the suffering of others.

Forgiveness is about justice. And justice is about love.

Forgiveness isn't about just forgetting what happened and pretending that it doesn't matter. Binding, holding on, is about working it through. About taking responsibility. About

recognising the harm done and the impact that has on the victim, the community and the offender.

What if the torture Jesus talks about is the torment we all suffer when we know we have done something wrong. The pain we all feel, the anguish, the consequences when we are cut off from the people we loved and the community we belong to.

The people Stevenson works with have sometimes done awful things. And they have often had awful things done to them, both in their lives before their imprisonment and in the treatment the state imposes on them. And yet, in his decision to bind to them, to be in close proximity, to keep going back, change happens. Change to them... and change to him.

77 times...

How long does it take us to change? How long to right a wrong? How many chances would you want?

Choir of Lansdowne Parish Church, Glasgow, Gordon Munro (Conductor), Stuart Muir (Piano) Tune performed to: 31 – 'I waited patiently for God'

Prayer of Adoration and Confession
God of grace,
your love created the universe,
and all that it contains.

Earth, air, fire, and water
the traditional 'elements' of all life.

Every part of creation made from the same
tiny atoms of life-giving energy.

Each one made with love.

You give us so much more than we deserve,
and you ask only that we love you in return.

You give us free will,
which allows us to choose
to say yes or no to your love.

Merciful God, forgive us,
for those times we chose to say no,
help us desire to say yes.

Father, you promise to forgive us;
to restore our relationship with you
when we turn and say yes to your love.

You invite us into a relationship
and desire us to play our full part in it.

You also ask us to treat the rest of creation as you do,
with love and mercy.

You have given us a great responsibility
over all creation and too often,
over millennia, we have failed to act wisely;
we have been greedy and selfish,
and have forgotten to care and share
all that creation gives us.

Merciful God, forgive us.

Help us to seek to be better co-creators,
and to make the changes we need to
so that our world can flourish as it should.

Your son, Jesus, has left us the example
we can choose to follow.

Give us courage to want to choose his path.
In his name, we pray
as we join in his words,

Our Father in heaven
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come
your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever.
Amen.

Sending

Forgiveness is hard to receive
and often more difficult to give.

As we close our time of worship,
know that God can cope.

Seventy-seven times
Is a lot of forgiveness,
and it is yours.

Receive it and go on.

Go on into this new week:
forgiven by God,
loved by Jesus,
and led by the Holy Spirit.