

A new study explores "micromorality," defined as small "judgments we make in everyday life" about treatment of other people. The study affirmed that good treatment of others is contagious, as a person receiving an act of kindness is more likely to treat someone kindly later in the day.

The ripple effect of godly behavior is nothing new. As the church began organizing in the first years after Jesus' resurrection, James and Peter spoke of rebuilding the temple, a place where "all other peoples may seek the Lord." When one person chooses kindness over indifference or malice, that person "builds a temple" to God, a place which can draw others to God. We who know God are called to make our lives places where others can find the love and mercy of God incarnate.

The study on micromorality may give new *evidence*, but its *findings* are not new. God taught us, through Jesus, that kindness begets kindness, that our care of one person may prompt that person to choose a more loving path. The Lord has been making these things known from long ago. (Carol Mead, Sept. 12, 2014)

Last week and this week we deal with the issue of forgiveness. Not forgetting but forgiveness. First question: how do you define forgiveness?

The Lord's Prayer reminds us that "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others." Reciprocity. I cannot receive what I am not willing to give. What happens when we find ourselves unable to forgive? What happens when we are forgiven but then we seem to forget that and are unwilling to pay that blessing forward? Today's Gospel would caution us that we might be captured and tortured until we can pay. Being unable to forgive puts us in prison- maybe not walls and bars and 3 squares a day, but a prison that keeps us living the incident over and over again. We are not free from the incident as long as we will not forgive.

One definition of forgiveness is accepting that what happened in the past is not going to change. When we forgive, we let that which happened in the past go. We do not need to forget what happened, particularly when what happened harmed someone. But we accept that what happened, happened, and we learn to stop wishing that it did not. We may choose to respond to what happened by seeking new laws or new ways of living so that the past does not repeat itself. That can be healthy self-protection.

When we hold onto our bitterness, our anger, our sadness and our frustration, we are the ones in debtor's prison. We are the ones harmed.

We love numbers and one way some people read the Gospel today is all about numbers. How many times should I forgive? Seven? Seventy-seven? Seventy times seven?

Think about the first slave. His debt was enormous! There was no way in his lifetime that he could repay that debt.

Today we shake our head and ask why the king gave that amount of credit to the slave, knowing the slave could not possibly pay it. Isn't that what many people say about our housing crisis of 2008-2009? Why did the lenders let people who wanted to buy houses buy them when the lender knew the borrower could not pay? We have blamed the lenders rather than the borrowers in many cases. "They should have known the borrower couldn't pay that mortgage, so the borrower should be able to keep the house because the lender was a bad actor."

The king, though, had pity on the slave and forgave the debt. So what does the first slave do? He runs into someone who owes him money. Rather than paying forward the gift and grace given to him, the first slave has the second slave thrown into prison. Well, how is he going to pay the debt if he is in prison? That's the fundamental problem with debtor's prisons.

But the king hears about this interaction between the first and second slaves and ends up turning the first slave over to be tortured until he could pay the entire debt- a debt we know the first slave had no ability to pay.

The consequences of our failure to forgive can be life-threatening and sometimes life-ending. It can be hard to forgive, particularly when we focus on the numbers. When we judge by what our society values rather than when we focus on the love and grace of God who forgives all our sins, time after time after time: seventy times seventy times seventy.

If you remember St. Augustine from last week's sermon, you remember that his counsel was for us to distinguish between what is essential and what is not when we are making decisions about how to live in community.

That's where Paul comes in this week. Welcome those who are weak in the faith- not for the purpose of quarreling- not for the purpose of judgment- but rather for the purpose of building up a community of believers who know what really matters: the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Pulling again from last week, Paul reminds us to "owe no one anything but love." Love as we have been loved. Forgive as we have been forgiven. Not always easy to do when we are really honest with ourselves deep down inside. Us vs. them. Is there ever a time and place when we might get to us and us?

Although these are not Paul's words, they express a sentiment we ought to consider: "Do not judge others because they sin differently than you do." We are all sinners- we are all in need of God's love and grace and mercy.

Paul's letter to the Romans, to a church that he had not founded and he had not yet visited, ought to give us pause. We hear these words whenever we have a funeral. They are another example that the words found in our Book of Common Prayer largely come from Scripture. "We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then,

whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." If we keep in mind that first and foremost our focus ought to be on God- and on the grace and mercy that have been poured out on us- without cost to us and without any ability to earn that grace and mercy- then perhaps we can hear and respond to the following words of Paul: "why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother and sister? For we all stand before the judgment seat of God.... So, then, each of us will be accountable to God."

We can play the numbers game all day long. And, in our secular world, numbers can be quite important- they can be how we measure worldly success. They can be the difference between a roof over our head and sleeping in our car. They can be the difference between a healthy, nutritious meal and one that harms our health although it tastes really good! Numbers are a way we have- and often need- as we account for ourselves in this world.

Numbers, though, in God's world are, if not meaningless, pretty meaningless. Seventy times seventy times seventy ad infinitum. God's love and mercy and grace are available no matter the size of our debt. Our response to this God is to let go of our insistence on measuring worth by the numbers. Of forgiving only as we are forgiven. Of holding on to a past that we wish was different and failing to see how doing so keeps us prisoner, being tortured and lessened by our anger and bitterness.

Gilberto Collazo reminds us that "our strength lies in understanding that the integrity with which we live our lives is tied directly to how our beliefs guide our actions" (Feasting on the Word, Tear A, volume 4(Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 66.) We can say the Lord's Prayer here on Sunday and daily at home. But unless we take deep into ourselves the plea and the understanding of what it really means to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us". We will remain in a prison of our own making. Without the understanding of the power that our failure to forgive has on us, our saying the Lord's Prayer will remain an "empty ritual devoid of significance and the power to transform" (1d).

Paul argues that there is a (3rd) way which is the faith way. Paul acknowledges that devout people can hold radically different convictions and still be good and faithful people. Paul is working to help that early Christian community avoid demonizing others and suggesting ways to faithfully disagree. When our life is centered in and on Christ, then we can learn to accept those who take different positions from us. (With thanks to Jeannette Good in Feasting, 61).

We know, as the study on micromorality shows, that good will brings more good will. Kind acts point to more kind acts. Why, then, is it so difficult for us to understand that when we fail to forgive we breed more situations of unforgiveness? We say we want to forgive but it seems to be very hard to practice forgiveness. Perhaps it is because we perceive that forgiving someone else gives them power over us. Perhaps because we feel vulnerable and are anxious that what went wrong is going to go wrong again.

**Whenever we feel weak, vulnerable or threatened when we face forgiving another, consider Jesus. We don't believe that Jesus was weak. We have in Jesus the example of forgiveness for the worst of crimes, the taking of his life. When we accept that we cannot change the past, we can let go of its' chains around our lives. When we accept that God's mercy and grace and love are endless, perhaps we can share some of that with those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is not easy. It calls on us to do something the world does not value, or does not value very often. And sometimes we are hurt again.**

**Remember that we are forgiven as we forgive. As we loose the chains of bitterness and anger that bind us up, we become free to love as God has loved us- forever and forever, Amen.**