

"Three strikes and you Not out"

Rev. Terrance Jacob on Matthew 18:21-35 at SALC on 9/13/26

How many of you would say there are some people in church that you cannot stand? People who just rub you up the wrong way? People who tend to offend you, offend others and just are offensive. No, not in our church, right? Wrong? This is true in any church. Rightly or wrongly we have people who feel slighted or ARE slighted by others. This is also the case in any organization where there are people. Right. Let's not try to act all holy and pious. Peter didn't act pious. He was upset with people within the body. In the church, so to speak.

This text is just after the teaching on how to deal with a brother or sister in Christ who is doing wrong. We heard that last week. We are to approach a sister or brother who is part of the body and sins against us or the body in a way that restores them, out of love for them and the Body!

Then this text: Peter seems to be impatient with this teaching, because Lord knows there are those whom we have to correct over and over. Peter asks, "But Lord, how many times must we forgive? The context indicates that Peter is impatient with those who would still do wrong, even after being corrected and forgiven.

These are stubborn people who simply do not learn. But so were the disciples: The preceding and related incidents are about things like "who is the greatest?" (this same chapter of Matthew 18:1) Then those who are causing others to stumble (v.6); the wandering sheep, that is, those who simply don't want to stay in line (v.12-14) and disregard the rules that are for the wellbeing of all. People within the body that are carnal and selfish.

So the Apostle Peter is upset about people who keep doing the same wrong thing over and over. He must have thought he was

being generous by offering to forgive someone 7 times, right? To us it sounds generous. I think that generally people say, "three strikes and you out!" Right. And that's not just for baseball.

There's a southern story of a father who took his son on a ride on his donkey cart (Some call it a buggy). As they went down the road, the donkey tripped, nearly dropping the whole cart, with the two of them. The father, whipped the donkey and said, "that's once." It happened again, and the father whipped the donkey and said, "that's twice!" A few minutes later the donkey tripped again. The father shouted, "That's thrice!" (3 times) and he shot the donkey dead. The child was livid. He protested, cursing and shouting at his father disrespectfully and calling him names. The father turned to his son and said, "that's once!" There never was a second or third time.

Jesus looks at Peter when Peter asks if seven times was enough and Jesus says seventy-seven (other translations say seventy times 7) – Jesus was not giving a number but using hyperbole again. Then Jesus goes into this elaborate illustration to teach that we should not grow weary in forgiving. Imagine if Jesus did not forgive Peter more than 3, even 7 times? Imagine if Jesus did not forgive me and you the umpteen times he has had to forgive us – often for the same error? Yet, we get weary.

Do you get tired of forgiving?

We are tested every day. By family, friends, neighbors, society, systems, just human existence may make us unforgiving.

If we cannot keep on forgiving, perhaps you should receive the righteous judgement for those who are not forgiven. That's what that illustration is about. That would be catastrophic for many of us – not to be forgiven because we do not forgive!

But Grace is shown to us in Christ. We are forgiven over and over. So we are to show grace. As we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Jesus is constantly telling us and let's hear Him, "this IS the world you live in. People are people. They all struggling with their humanity. They will stumble as you do." Yes, we all do. I know I do!

Jesus is telling Peter, because he knows that Peter will learn that lesson when he later denies Jesus 3 times, "Peter you are forgiven. So forgive others – as many times as they need forgiveness."

Let me end with a story from this week. I met a stranger, Chris and we got talking about our lives. His father was a Vet from the War with Japan in the early 1940s. He had returned from the war with many scars, the worst were emotional. He was so traumatized that he hated Japanese with a vengeance for decades after the war was ended. He couldn't stand them. Then his wife became very ill – terminally ill and who was the attending physician who did so much for his wife? A Japanese American doctor. That experience of grace shown to him as a former soldier who also killed his people, cause Chris's father to forgive and to repent. Forgiveness restores – both the offender and the offended who carries the resentment.

We who are shown grace, need to show Grace too. And in so doing we will live as witnesses of this Gospel that we may draw all people to the one who alone can truly forgive, as He showed us on the Cross. Amen