Forgiven and forgiving: Matthew 18:21-35

We do not abandon others, and we refuse to be abandoned ourselves.

by Susan Pendleton Jones in the August 25, 1999 issue

Each time the invitation to the table was offered he sat silently in the pew. Others would excuse themselves as they passed in front of him, but he never moved. When I visited him at his home, I cautiously broached the subject. "I can't do it," he answered. "I can't come to the table. You see, in Vietnam I killed a man. I don't think God could ever forgive me for that."

As we sat in my office tears welled up in her eyes. "I hate him. I can't believe I'm saying it, but I hate my own son-in-law. I hate what he's done to my daughter and now what it's doing to my grandchildren. You may have noticed, Pastor, that I get up halfway through the service and leave. I feel like such a hypocrite, harboring these feelings while trying to worship God. I just can't do it anymore."

Both of these persons had been Christians all their lives. Yet unresolved issues involving forgiveness were jeopardizing their relationship with the church. What both of them recognized is that there is an important connection between their struggle with forgiveness and their faith; what they failed to see is that the practice of their faith should be central in resolving the issues of forgiveness with which they struggled. They were allowing their inability to forgive—or be forgiven—to cut them off from fellowship in the body of Christ, the very community that should be helping them work through and resolve these difficult issues.

Matthew 18 asks: "How do we keep the church community together when forgiveness needs to happen right under our own roof? How should the Christian community deal with sin that lurks so closely at the door? What is expected of us as we learn how to be Christians?"

Simon Peter comes to Jesus with this kind of question. Imagine how he must have felt. He knows what people are like, how easy it is to hold a grudge, to become

bitter, to offer forgiveness once, twice, maybe up to three times as Jewish tradition permits. Wanting to be generous, Peter proudly steps forward to answer his own question. "As many as seven times?" he asks. He was willing to go the extra mile—and then some.

But Jesus has something different in mind. Whether you read his answer to Peter as "77 times" or "70 times seven," the point is the same. Jesus answers Peter by telling him not to assume that you can count how many times you offer forgiveness and then be done with it. Forgiveness must become a practice—a commitment—that is to be sustained and renewed each day throughout our lives. It is not a single action, feeling or thought. Forgiveness must become an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with God and with others. Peter asks how generous he should be, yet he is still asking about limits. He's thinking quantitatively while Jesus answers qualitatively—with the offer of limitless forgiveness. This is what God is like.

Because we have been abundantly forgiven by God, we are able to forgive others in turn. There is a direct connection between forgiving others and being forgiven. Therefore, in the Lord's Prayer we pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

The parable of the unforgiving servant, which follows the exchange between Peter and Jesus, focuses on those who are willing to receive God's forgiveness but are unwilling to offer it to others. The servant has been forgiven a huge debt and yet is unwilling to forgive even a small debt owed to him. Such unwillingness shows, though, that he really is not able to receive God's forgiveness. For truly to receive forgiveness is to recognize how extravagant God's gracious forgiving love is and, in response, to offer it to others.

Yet if we are honest, there are times when we find ourselves behaving like that unforgiving servant. We are pleased with the idea of a forgiving God, but not if it would require us to change our lives. Forgiveness becomes something we claim but fail to proclaim in our living. We too often sound like George Eliot's description in *Adam Bede*: "We hand folks over to God's mercy, and show none ourselves."

Yet it is difficult to be forgiven and forgiving people. It takes time and involves struggle. Sister Helen Prejean, in her book *Dead Man Walking*, tells the story of Lloyd LeBlanc, a Roman Catholic layman, whose son was murdered. When he arrived in the field with the sheriff's deputies to identify his son, LeBlanc immediately knelt by

his boy's body and prayed the Lord's Prayer. When he came to the words: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," he realized the depth of the commitment he was making. "Whoever did this, I must forgive them," he later told Prejean. Though it has been difficult not to be overcome by bitterness and feelings of revenge that well up from time to time, LeBlanc said that each day, for the rest of his life, forgiveness must be prayed for and struggled for and won.

Christian communities are sustained by people who know what it means to discover the miracle of God's forgiveness, and who are thus committed to a way of life as forgiven and forgiving people. We do not abandon others, and refuse to be abandoned ourselves. We cannot rest content with conflict or division or even with "conflict management"; we aim for the more difficult and more rewarding practice of forgiveness and reconciliation. As we live in communities shaped by these practices, we will experience anew what it means to be forgiven—and forgiving. Perhaps then, when the invitation is offered, all of us will come to the table joyfully.