

Sermon St Augustine's 14/9/08

There are some funny stories about revenge! A married couple had many disagreements. Yet somehow the wife always stayed calm and collected. One day her husband commented on his wife's restraint. "When I get mad at you," he said, "you never fight back. How do you control your anger?"

The wife said: "I work it off by cleaning the toilet."

The husband asked: "How does that help?"

She said: "I use your toothbrush!"

A traffic warden suffered a minor accident that put him in the hospital for a couple of days. His injuries had been to his foot and his ankle. Then why, he wondered, did he feel what seemed to be a large bandage on his chest? With some effort he was able to pull his hospital gown down far enough

so he could examine the bandage and figure out its purpose. When he did, he saw it was indeed a large bandage, the sticky kind that is really painful to tear off of a hairy chest. On the bandage was written this message: “A gift . . . from the nurse you gave a parking ticket to last week.”

Now – maybe you can identify with the feelings of victory in revenge..... but our subject today is **forgiveness**. How many times must I forgive someone who has hurt me, abused me, exploited me? That is Simon Peter’s question. How many times? Would seven times be enough?

Peter thought that he was being generous. After all, the rabbis of his day taught that only three times were required. They said, “Forgive three times, but not the fourth.”

Peter was taking what the rabbis commanded, multiplying it by two, and

adding one more for good measure! Seven times, Peter thought, should be plenty enough forgiveness.

But it was not enough for Jesus. In answer to how many times we should forgive Jesus said, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.” In other words, forgiveness is limitless. This is important because some of you are probably thinking, “That’s a lot, seventy times seven. But at least the four hundred ninety-first time, I can give him a Glasgow Kiss and sort him out!”

We miss Jesus’ point. There is to be **no limit** to our forgiveness. Forgiveness is at the heart of Christian faith. We are not to hold grudges, carry resentments, harbour bitterness. It’s a tough teaching, but it is one of Jesus’ most important teachings. It is at the centre of everything we believe about Christ.

REFUSING TO FORGIVE CAN BE DEADLY.

That's the first thing we need to see. What is the **alternative** to refusing to forgive?

Isn't it to carry around for a lifetime a feeling of bitterness, resentment, simmering hatred? Why would you **do** that to yourself?

Someone has said that harbouring resentments is like taking poison and waiting for the other guy to die.

Someone else has said that letting hatred simmer within us, eating at our emotions and our body, is like burning down our house to get rid of rats. C. S. Lewis once observed that he had finally forgiven a man who had been dead for more than thirty years. Imagine that! Carrying negative feelings around for thirty years.

Meanwhile, as has often been noted, the other person is out dancing, sleeping soundly and not giving you a second thought! Why would you **do** that to yourself?

When we carry anger and resentment toward someone else, the person we really hurt is ourselves.

The Unforgiven live in our heads and our hearts, and if you're going to let someone do that they should be charging them rent!

Someone once wrote, “Not to forgive imprisons me in the past and locks out all potential for change. I thus yield control to another, my enemy, and doom myself to suffer the consequences of the wrong.

I once heard an immigrant rabbi make an astonishing statement. ‘Before coming to

America, I had to forgive Adolf Hitler,' he said. 'I did not want to bring Hitler inside me to my new country.'

“We forgive not just to fulfill some higher law of morality; we do it for ourselves.

You see .. The first and often the only person to be healed by forgiveness is the person who **does** the forgiveness . . .”

This is to say that forgiveness is one of the best gifts we can give ourselves. Do you understand that?

I fear sometimes that we regard forgiveness as something we do for God, or something to do because it is the nice thing to do. All of that is true, of course.

But forgiveness is ultimately a gift we give **ourselves**. A gift to ourselves! We need to purge ourselves of our negative feelings toward that co-worker, toward

that family member, toward that ex-spouse, or whoever, who has hurt us.

We do that for our own well-being. And that is the Gospel!