

**15 Pentecost
September 13, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

I think it is fair to say that all of us, at one time or another in our lives, has been hurt by another person ... intentionally or unintentionally. Sometimes it is a betrayal of trust. Perhaps someone owed you some money and didn't repay the loan ... like in the story from Matthew's Gospel this morning. Or, maybe they had made a promise ... even a sacred vow ... that they then broke. It could have been that they simply didn't include you in an event that you felt was important, or they said something hurtful. In any case, the relationship was/is broken.

Of course there are also those cases where someone causes us a grave loss ... such as the death or injury of a loved one. We may not even know the other person, and there may be nothing that anyone can do to make the situation "right." The question here is, can we every forgive someone for such irresponsibility? I'm not talking about accountability here, but forgiveness. I think of a reckless or drunk driver causing the permanent injury of a child, or one of the tragic shootings that have taken the life of innocent people. People need to be held accountable in such situations. But how does one wrap their head and heart around forgiveness at a time like this?

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus tells the disciple Peter that forgiveness in God's kingdom ... God's realm ... must be generous beyond limits. Jesus, using a phrase from the Book of Genesis about Lamech, the father of Noah, says we shouldn't forgive our offenders a mere seven times, but rather, seventy-seven, times. This may sound like an exaggeration, but Jesus' use of hyperbole is saying to Peter, "If you have to ask the question, then you miss the point."

In other words, forgiveness should be our regular practice ... our way of life ... our default mode. But, why should we go to such lengths? Because we are a forgiven people ... a people generously forgiven by God. In light of the abundant grace in which we stand, what possible response can we have, but to pay it forward?

In light of this story I think it is helpful to clarify what forgiveness is, and what it is not. Forgiveness is not denial. Forgiveness is not pretending that an offense doesn't matter ... or that a wound doesn't hurt ... or that our faith requires us to forget past harms and "let bygones be bygones." Forgiveness isn't acting as if things don't have to change, or assuming that because God is merciful, God isn't grieved and angered by injustice.

On the contrary, the starting line of forgiveness is the acknowledgement of wrongdoing ... that harm has been done ... that there has been real and profound violation. Whenever we talk

about the need for forgiveness, we must begin by recognizing and naming the extent of the brokenness.

Remember, we are created for good. We are born in blessing. We are created for love, equality, and wholeness. We are made in God's image ... we are made for a just and nurturing world that honors our dignity. It is part of our Baptismal Covenant. When we experience any departure from that basic goodness, it is appropriate ... it is human and healthy and faithful ... to react with distress.

In spite of this, recent events leave me somewhat confused about forgiveness, and what Jesus is telling us to do. The first example is the obvious confession by our president that he knew how dangerous the COVID-19 coronavirus was early on in this pandemic, and he chose to mislead the public, and took no real action to address the issue. How do we ... individually and as a nation ... forgive someone who had the resources, and the leadership capital, to prevent many of the deaths, and curtail the illness of many millions ... not to speak of the economic consequences that followed? I leave this as a question to ponder.

The same Bible that calls us to forgive also calls us to mourn, to lament, to speak truth to power, and to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Forgiveness in our faith tradition works hand-in-hand with the arduous work of repentance and transformation. In other words, there is nothing godly about responding to systemic evil with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity. Think of racism and unexamined white privilege.

So, I am somewhat unsure of the role of forgiveness in the continuing plight of people of color being brutalized by systemic racism in our country. It is easy to point to the white nationalist and neo-Nazis and blame them for acts of racial hatred. But, what about those many times that I have been passive in the face of a racial slur spoken by someone I know, or my blindness to how my white privilege continues to contribute to the oppression of Blacks in our society. Again ... for me ... this is a question to ponder.

We don't hear much about righteous anger these days. After all, there's something unseemly about displays of temper ... something unsophisticated ... something crude. It isn't polite to get angry, and it's certainly unacceptable to stay angry.

If you feel this way, then consider that righteous anger is very much what Jesus did. Remember him cleansing the temple with a whip? Remember him blasting the religious hypocrites of his day for oppressing the poor? Remember him rebuking his disciples for blocking vulnerable children from his presence? Yes, Jesus forgave ... and taught about forgiveness. But he also raged. He also condemned the mistreatment of the most vulnerable and threatened people in his society.

In other words, there is a time to get angry ... and to stay angry. There is a time to insist on change. A time to say, "Enough is enough." Yes, we are called to practice and preach

forgiveness. But I believe it is also the task of the faithful to take seriously what Jesus took seriously with impassioned and sustained cries for justice.

Forgiveness is not synonymous with healing or reconciliation. Healing has its own timetable, and sometimes reconciliation with the offending party isn't even possible. Sometimes our lives depend on us severing ties with those who have hurt us, even after we've forgiven them. In this sense, forgiveness is not an end ... rather, it is a beginning ... and where it will lead is not necessarily pre-ordained. Forgiveness is the *beginning* of the hard work of building God's kingdom ... not the end.

Forgiveness is a process ... a messy, non-linear, and often thorny process that can leave us feeling whole and liberated one minute, and reliving the pain of the offense all over again the next. In my experience, no one who casually says the words "I forgive you" gets a pass from this messy process, and no one who struggles extra hard to forgive should feel that they're less spiritual than those who don't. The daily business of forgiveness as a slow, sustained way of life.

So, what is the opposite of forgiveness. For many people it is self-righteous resentment ... sometimes living with fantasies of revenge. The problem with this is that it eats the soul of the one carrying the resentment. In her popular memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes that withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.

I happen know about this first hand. After my twelve-year-old son Christopher was injured in an auto accident he spent a month in a coma, five months in a body cast, and was a patient in 12 rehab facilities in five states. Understandably, I became clinically depressed. One day my therapist asked me if I liked the boy that was recklessly driving when the car went out of control. I answered, "No, I really don't like him." My therapist said, "Then why do you choose to let him have so much control over your life? Why do you allow him to occupy so much of your emotional landscape?"

My unexpressed anger and resentment at the boy driving the car and his family ... they were parishioners of mine ... led me into depression. I came to realize that if I'm consumed with my own pain ... if I've made injury my identity ... if I insist on weaponizing my well-deserved anger in every interaction I have with these people who hurt me ... then I'm drinking poison, and the poison will kill me long before it does anything to them. To choose forgiveness is to release myself from the tyranny of my bitterness. There was no magic switch that was thrown, but that question by my therapist asked me was the moment that my resentment began to diminish, and eventually there was forgiveness.

Jesus isn't telling Peter that forgiveness is limited to 77 times, then you are allowed resentment and revenge. Some translations of Matthew's gospel say "70 times 7" instead of "77" ... that is 490. Again, as I said earlier, Jesus is speaking in hyperbole to get the point across. Jesus is saying the God's love is unconditional, and we should strive for the same.

We humans all too often make love and judgment mutually exclusive. However, where we cry out for revenge, retribution, and punishment, God holds out for restorative justice ... a kind of justice we can barely imagine ... a kind of justice that has the power to heal both the offended and the offender.

I have come to believe that forgiveness is a transformed way of seeing. A way of seeing that is forward-looking ... future-focused. I believe that God is always and everywhere in the business of taking the worst things that happen to us, and going to work on them for the purposes of expanding wholeness and blessing. Because God is in the story, we can rest assured that our wounds will not end in loss, trauma, brokenness, and defeat. There will be another turn, another chapter, another path, another grace. Because God loves us, we don't have to forgive out of scarcity. We can forgive out of God's abundance.

Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber, after describing mistreatment as a chain that binds the offended and the offender, writes about the power of forgiveness to free us for the work of justice and transformation. She writes:

"Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn't actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we're not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So what if forgiveness, rather than being a pansy way to say, 'It's okay,' is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it's saying, 'What you did was so not okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.'? Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter. And free people are dangerous people. Free people aren't controlled by the past. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And that's worth fighting for."

As I listen to these words, I pray ... first for myself, and then for all of us ... that we will take up the hard work of forgiveness for the sake of a broken and desperate world. I believe it is the most important work we can do as the children of a God who grieve and rage against oppression. May we loosen the chains that bind us ... and may we always pay forward the healing grace and forgiveness of God, until justice reigns.

Amen.