

7th Sunday after Epiphany
February 24, 2019
Church of the Advent
St. Mark's Roxobel

Forgiveness

I must confess there are a lot of places I come to in the Bible where I find myself wanting to take an immediate left turn, avoiding what looks like emergency lights blinking ahead warning of the hold up of a big old messy accident, and today's readings--at least from Genesis and Luke--have each been one of those places, because both the story of Joseph and his brothers, and the heart of the Sermon on the Plain from Jesus, want to draw me into that big old messy topic of forgiveness. Now as Christians we know that forgiveness is a central theme in our beliefs and identity. It is necessary to grasp its importance in our call to love one another as we have been loved--so important that Jesus plopped it right in the middle of The Lord's Prayer: *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us*. We say it every week, if not every day. And it is certainly a perk to be forgiven of *our* sins, acknowledged and repented. It is comforting to know that nothing can separate us from the love of God, who is big enough to forgive us for anything. It is a bit harder to be drawn into the role of the *forgiving one*, because there is so much in this life that just seems unforgivable.

Take Joseph's story, for example. One of the 12 sons of Jacob, Joseph was born after a long period of barrenness that had cursed his mother Rachel, who was Jacob's favorite wife. Perhaps because Jacob considered the birth of Joseph to be a special blessing, he was his favorite son. Jacob's gift to Joseph of that coat of many colors featured in children's bible stories must have galled those older brothers who were delegated the work that kept the large family housed and fed. It is not hard to imagine that the favored Joseph might have been a bit of a brat, and in his siblings' resentment, their unwillingness to forgive their father's favoritism, his brothers plotted to kill Joseph and blame it on a wild animal--which is what they told their father, Jacob. What they actually did was to sell Joseph to some passing human traffickers who resold him to the household of the Pharaoh in Egypt. By his own cleverness and the grace of God, and a gift of interpreting dreams, Joseph got noticed in the Pharaoh's court and rose up the ranks to a position of power and influence that left him in charge of the stores of grain that had been stockpiled

against a period of widespread drought and famine. Years later, when Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to scout the family's prospects for survival through the hard times to come, they met none other than the young adult Joseph--who held their lives in his hands. This is the scene from Genesis that we read today--Joseph revealing his identity and securing a future for the brothers who had wanted him dead and gone. Joseph, gave credit to God for how everything worked out, and chose to forgive. Hard to imagine, powerful to hear. The wound of rejection healed by forgiveness and the grace of God, creating something life-giving out of jealousy, malice, and loss.

Every life is a mixed bag of joy and pain, life and death, and people who hold us up *and* tear us down. Others love us *and* disappoint us. Important people bring us indescribable happiness, *and* cause deep wounds that resist healing. When we are hurt, it is in our nature to defend ourselves. We fight back in self-defense or take flight in self-preservation. It is not in our nature to forgive quickly or easily. We imagine the cost of forgiveness to be high--loss of dignity, minimization of the depth of loss, failure of restitution. Embracing forgiveness feels a bit like being cheated of our righteous anger and indignation at another's offence or wrong-doing, wasting the pity we deserve for our pain. Surely if God loves us then God would want to comfort us when we have been wronged like our best friends do: take our side, offer to go to battle for us, agree that the party that has caused injury should suffer proportionately with high drama. Right?

Unfortunately, not so much. Jesus said:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also...Forgive...Be merciful...

Ouch. Why does this make sense? Especially when daily we hear new stories of those who have long suffered abuse in the silent acquiescence of others who might have rescued them, how can turning the other cheek make sense? How does *love your enemies* work in the world as we know it?

The only thing this preacher can offer you on this hard lesson is something I learned in my long years of working with the dying. Everyone on a hospice team--nurses and nursing assistants, social workers, chaplains, and doctors--spends hard quality time with patients and

their loved ones, and though everyone's experience is unique, everyone comes away with some perceptions in common. Generally speaking, for someone to die in peace, there are four things they need to say and hear from those they have loved in life--whether close or estranged--before they can let go in peace. It is as if these last words, both simple and profound, if spoken in sincerity, invite the Spirit to make a path towards a promised eternal life where we will see God face to face. These four things are *Thank you, Forgive me, I forgive you, I love you*. Regardless of faith held or practiced, these four things hold the same power for almost everyone who has the opportunity to speak them. Gratitude, forgiveness and love. 50% forgiveness. Forgiveness flowing out of gratitude and inviting love to surround everyone present. Love enough to cover the mistakes made in human relationships and to enfold one of the most important of life's meaningful moments in reconciliation and healing.

So should we save forgiveness for our death beds? I don't think that is what Jesus had in mind. The message here is that if forgiveness is so important in our lives that we allow it to dominate our last words on earth, is it not important enough to practice long before we draw our last breath? Is there not some value in embracing it along the way?

Ira Byock, a well-admired Palliative Care physician and author, describes an unforgiven issue or unresolved anger with another person like a rock in your shoe that you can't take out. It might seem small but it has a large impact, interfering with walking, running, dancing, and generally living life to the fullest. While that little rock is there it is a reminder of a long festering wound; we cannot be free of its power to distract us from the beauty and joy that surrounds us every day. Forgiveness may not even be sought or appreciated by the one we forgive, any more than that rock appreciates being taken out of our shoe and thrown on the ground; but forgiveness is not about the other person, the offender, the one who has wounded. Forgiveness is about the one who forgives, the one who lifts up the weight of old anger and resentment and throws it off, finding freedom, making room for new life to grow and take hold, for whom according to Jesus, *a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap*.

The Rev. Becca Stevens, our powerful keynote speaker and preacher at our recent Diocesan Convention, who has worked with victims of unspeakable trauma almost 20 years, has written that forgiveness does not mean that you do not hold someone accountable or escape the trauma, but rather that there is a path forward that is deep and beautiful, where the enemy shown love cannot rob us of the beauty and fullness of life.

Oscar Wilde is quoted to have said, *Always forgive your enemies--nothing annoys them so much.* But the better take-away comes from 20th Century radio host Bernard Meltzer: *When you forgive, you in no way change the past--but you sure do change the future.* Amen to that.