

Tricky Forgiveness

September 13, 2020

(I credit John Buchanan, Desmond Tutu for the inspiration to write this sermon)

Matthew 18:21–35

At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?”

Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.

“The kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars. He couldn’t pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market.

“The poor wretch threw himself at the king’s feet and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.

“The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten dollars. He seized him by the throat and demanded, ‘Pay up. Now!’

“The poor wretch threw himself down and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ But he wouldn’t do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid. When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.

“The king summoned the man and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn’t you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?’ The king was furious and put the screws to the man until he paid back his entire debt. And that’s exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn’t forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy.”

Before I start – I want to say upfront some of you may disagree with my sermon. Or think it is too political. For me, most of all, it is trying to follow the sometimes-difficult teachings of Jesus. You can decide.

In June, a moving prayer vigil took place in Houston, Texas where George Floyd grew up. It was a group of white locals. They knelt in front of a black congregation - praying for forgiveness.

One man was heard praying: 'Father God we ask for forgiveness from our black brothers and sisters for years and years of racism,' They called it a 'pray test'.

An African American pastor colleague of mine, once said to me after I asked for his forgiveness, that it was not his responsibility to forgive me. Only God could do that. But my amends were - doing something about it.

I believe I understand what he was saying.

“The decision to forgive is rooted in faith. The desire to forget is rooted in racism.”

This whole idea about forgiveness has troubled me. How to forgive the untruths from our leaders and news outlets. How to forgive broken promises to assist those who need it most.

How to forgive abusers when they injure or even kill another person.

And the ongoing incidents of the death of our black sisters and brothers.

And certainly September 11th (which was Friday) when a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks

2,977 people died, nineteen hijackers committed murder / suicide, and more than 6,000 others were injured. (pause)

Is it taboo to talk about forgiveness? Is it simply church jargon? Is it impossible or a justifiably way of denial?

Our prayer of forgiveness is tricky.

I know folks who no longer attend church because its confessions feel more like judging than forgiving.

Contrary someone said - that “forgiveness is a way to break apart cycles of violence, vengeance, and bitterness for us and society.’

— Desmond Tutu, wrote No Future Without Forgiveness when white and black south Africans struggled to make reparations after Apartheid. (though it is not over yet.)

“To forgive is not just to be altruistic.

It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me. Forgiveness gives people resilience, enabling them to survive –

And emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them.”

Forgiveness is tricky.

Because sometimes it doesn't take seriously tragedy, pain and suffering. You have heard it or maybe thought it - "You can't forgive him; you can't let him get away with that."

Forgiveness *can* feel like betrayal—of the victim, of our family, our faith, our very humanity.

(pause)

So be very careful about advising victims of those abuses and racism, violence to forgive - the psychologists tell us.

Don't enable evil by overlooking it or minimizing or trivializing it. In fact, forgiveness is confronting evil and pain and suffering, naming it, dealing with it.

Fred Craddock tells a wonderful story of a six-year-old boy whose mother asked him to stop running through the house because he might stumble and fall and hurt himself or break something.

So, of course, he ran and stumbled and fell and broke a vase.

His father saw it all happen, picked him up, dusted him off, and said, "Don't worry about it. It's just a vase."

His mother, however, knelt down and gathered up the shattered pieces and said softly, "It wasn't just a vase. It was my favorite vase.

My mother gave it to me, and I looked forward to giving it to my children."

And she wept, and the little boy wept, and the mother took him in her arms and hugged him and he hugged her back. "*Who forgave here, the father or the mother?*" Craddock asked.

Jesus talks a lot about forgiveness: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," he taught his disciples to pray.

Peter asked him about it. "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" "Seven times and then on number eight you're free to let him have it?"

No, Jesus said. Seventy-seven, or seventy times seven, which is really a metaphor for "without number; stop counting."

And then he tells a funny story in a painful sort of way.

A servant who owed the king a great deal of money was forgiven. But when that same servant encounters another who owes him money, he refuses him forgiveness, grabs him by the throat, and demands repayment.

When the king hears about it, he becomes very angry, changes his decision to forgive, and puts the first servant in jail until he pays, which, given the amount he owes, means forever.

The unforgiving servant has not only missed the point; he is going to miss the rest of his life.

The problem is that he can't accept and embrace his own forgiveness – so he is not able to forgive others.

Jesus was always walking up to folks and, without warning: 'Your sins are forgiven,' and 'Go, sin no more; your sins are forgiven.'

(pause)

Almost nobody ever asked for it.

Jesus knew that without forgiveness there would be no meeting of God and each other."

It is the hardest thing of all, I think.

We do not like the idea that there is anything about us that needs forgiving.

We don't like the word sin because of its trivial associations

With the sins we were taught to avoid in as children: drinking, smoking, and, above all else, sex.

We want nothing to do with guilt in any form, particularly religious guilt.

We rather our religion to be positive and upbeat and, frankly, if we put it to a vote, I doubt that the prayer of confession would remain in the worship service.

Forgiveness is hard and is often impossible.

But we will save the rest of our lives; to acknowledge and embrace that we are not perfect.

We all share one thing - that there is a gap between who we are and who we ought to be and could be; between who we are and who God created us to be.

In the 60s' the non-violent "soul force" that Martin Luther King Jr taught was a combination of Hinduism and Christianity.

Forgiveness became a big part of the civil rights movement.

King described forgiveness as a pardon, a process of life and the Christian weapon of social redemption.

In MLK's words, "forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude". I like that.

Ignatius Spirituality warns us -

1. Forgiveness is not the acceptance of injustice.
2. Forgiveness is not a reason to keep things the way they always have been.
3. Forgiveness is not incompatible with loving anger.
4. Forgiveness does not eliminate the need for mutual communication.
5. Forgiveness is not yet reconciliation.
6. Forgiveness is not a moment but a process.
7. Forgiveness does not forget history.
8. Forgiveness does not create illusions but engages deeply with what is real.
9. Forgiveness is not a straight line.
10. Forgiveness is not something that we do alone, but only with the grace of God.

Do you remember February 13, 2011 Anders Breivik who committed horrendous murders in Norway? The day after his trial 613,000 Norwegians flooded the town square in Oslo stood in pouring rain -to confront their mass murder. But amazingly, their protest was not one of anger or calling for his death. Instead they sang a popular children's song - titled "Children of the Rainbow."

The translated words of that song day went like this: "

*A sky full of stars.
Blue ocean far as you see.
An earth where flowers grow.
Can you wish for more?*

*Together we shall live; every sister, every brother.
Small children of the rainbow.
And a fertile soil . . .
But tell all the children;
tell your father,
tell your mother,
this is our last chance;
to share one hope, one world."*

Amazing.

Let us be such instruments of God's love. Amen.