

16th Sunday after Pentecost September 17, 2023

Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness. Literally in this gospel reading it means something like, setting free or sending away.

But what is forgiveness? What does it look like?

Theologian Lewis Smedes says forgiveness is relinquishing my right to get even. It is not eliminating all the consequences of the evil that has been committed. But It is giving up my right to hurt you for hurting me.

I agree with that definition and would add that forgiveness relates to the party who has been offended. To the one who has been sinned against. When I forgive someone, it is irrelevant whether they have said I'm sorry or not. The forgiveness I offer is about me. My relationship both with God and to the one who has harmed me.

Author Frederick Buechner reminds us that forgiveness is an act of radical self-interest. We punish ourselves by carrying around our grief and anger when we do not forgive others. By forgiving another, I have freed myself from that which could ultimately destroy me.

Bishop Michael Rinehardt puts it this way, "This kind of forgiveness means choosing not to hold hatred in our hearts. We may be so wounded we have trouble letting go. Forgiveness means choosing not to relentlessly harbor anger. People need to be held accountable, but vengeance and retaliation are off the table. Forgiveness means I am not going to let the wrong or the abuse define me. I will not let it keep me from living into a hopeful and joy-filled future. I choose

not to carry around the heavy anchors of anger, bitterness, resentment or hate. I choose to live into the future, in spite of the scars of the past.”

I’m sure most of us know someone who has been bound by that anger, desire for vengeance, bitterness, resentment. Who have remained in its grip for their entire lives because they cannot forgive.

The obverse of forgiveness is repentance and confession. When someone who has done wrong sees what they have done, turns from that, admits what they have done to the person they have wronged and apologizes for it. There, too, it is about them. Releasing themselves from the guilt, denial, and harm that carrying that offense with them will bring.

When forgiveness and repentance/confession meet you have reconciliation. A restoration of relationship that God desires for all human beings. A difficult thing to achieve.

In fact, this whole forgiveness thing is hard. Very hard. Often the closest we get is to tuck away someone’s offense until such time as they do something else, and then we pull it out of our hip pocket and hit them over the head with it again.

Forgiveness is hard because it calls us to something that feels in some ways wrong to us. It is easier (and in many immediate ways) more satisfying to lash out, hold onto our anger, go for vengeance. They deserve it for what they did! You can’t not feel those things. The question is, what do you do with those emotions.

Forgiveness is hard, because we also must also deal with God’s justice. Mike Rinehardt reminds us, “Forgiveness does not mean we allow destructive things to happen or continue. It does not mean discarding healthy boundaries. Forgiveness

does not mean we are going to be best friends. Forgiving an abusive ex doesn't mean you have to marry him or her again. Forgiving an abusive person does not mean you keep putting yourself in the dysfunctional arena in which the abuse takes place."

Let me be clear- if you are in an abusive relationship of whatever kind it is not okay and you need to leave. To be safe. That kind of behavior is doing immeasurable harm to you... and to the one who is harming you. And for each of your sakes I would say to leave that situation. If you are abusing someone, stop. That is not God's desire for you or for them. It harms the image of God in both of you.

Forgiveness does not mean there will not be consequences for your actions. Especially in the left-hand reign of this world when laws are broken. Or even in the right-hand reign of heaven when boundaries are set to keep people safe.

Forgiveness is about relationship, not consequences. It keeps us oriented rightly to others and to God, but that doesn't mean I need to be in relationship with someone. While that reconciliation is God's ultimate desire for us, it is hard.

My wife Karen, step-daughter Amanda, and daughter in law Nikki, when they gave their victim impact statement at the sentencing of the man convicted of killing my step-son Erik while driving drunk, all in one form or another forgave him. Let go of their personal desire for vengeance. Even while acknowledging there should be consequences. He, in turn, gave what I felt was a sincere confession and apology, promising to change his ways. But I can almost guarantee there will never be a relationship there. Understandable so, and perhaps that is about the best we can hope this side of Jesus coming again.

Forgiveness is hard, because here in the United States we have a strong mythology around vengeance- from John Wick and his dog, to the Western Cowboy like Ethan from *The Searchers*, to Maximus in *Gladiator*. Characters we lift up and admire. A way of responding that is modeled to us, particularly as males, as one that is admirable. Even expected. But, even in fiction, look more closely at these lives that have been bound by their desire for revenge, cutting them off from love, mercy, grace. From life fuller and more abundant. A life bound to the acts that were perpetrated on them. And at the end, what do they have when their vengeance is done? The perpetrators, invariably, are dead. But they would have died anyway. Their dog and wife are still dead. Their niece is home, but their relationships with their family and friends ruined. At the end of the day, nothing but them has changed.

The parable Jesus uses here is so hyperbolic in all its details that it is obviously meant to make a point. One that opens our eyes to see ourselves and God anew. The debt owed by the slave is incredibly large- think \$1 billion. The forgiveness of the king is also incredibly generous. Even though, according to the standards of the day, he had every right to what he was going to do. The response of the forgiven slave to his debtor is right, but over about 3-4 months wages of debt. Think \$5,000 at minimum wage. The King's point is this- if I forgive you this HUGE debt. Isn't it incumbent upon you to forgive something that is so trifling by comparison? To spread to others what you have first received. That's the reign of heaven. That's a trickle down economy I can get behind.

Do you hear the echo of the Lord's Prayer in this parable? Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Anyone else wince a bit

when praying that petition? Say a quick addition of “O God, please...do better by me than I do towards others”?

Both this parable and that prayer seek to open our eyes to the enormity of what God has forgiven us and continues to forgive through Jesus Christ. Daily. And this parable and that prayer rightly roots our forgiveness of others in God’s mercy and love to us. If God has forgiven us so much, couldn’t we forgive someone else of something so much less? For our sake as well as theirs. Because we know what God’s forgiveness to us has meant.

What would the world look like if we lived out this kind of forgiveness not just within these walls, but everywhere, with everyone, always? Can we enter into the divine imagination and see that? Imagine that.

Because forgiveness frees us from ties we didn’t even know bound us. It restores us as those who forgive... but can also free the one forgiven. Forgiveness also creates possibilities, a future, something new. Forgiveness is rooted in the desire for life. And that is what God is about. Life. Not death. Hope. Not despair.

Like the process for resolving conflict last week, forgiveness orients us always into relationship with others. For we are in this together. All of us. Because while forgiveness is individual, it affects the community. And communal forgiveness, letting go, can also be transformative.

Peter thought he was being generous in his offer to forgive seven times. Jewish rabbis said you only had to forgive three times. But Jesus shows him how limited his imagination really was. How small his generosity was.

As the Rev. Dr. David Lose puts it, "Maybe in hearing once again of God's forgiveness our gaze will be lifted up from the constant keeping of scores that preoccupies us to see God's open hand of blessing. No guarantee, of course, but just the promise of grace and recognition that the ability to forgive is ultimately just as much a gift as being forgiven is. And, fortunately, we worship a God who absolutely loves to give us incredible gifts."

Friends, forgiveness is hard, but oh so worth it. Come to this table and receive the body and blood of the one who forgives us all our sins, Jesus Christ, and be strengthened to go and do likewise in a world that so desperately needs it.

Thanks be to God.