

Matthew 18: 21-34

The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

*Forgiveness is the Bridge between Memory and Hope*

On September 11, 2001, death and destruction traumatized our country. This event rent scars upon the landscapes of New York, Washington DC, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania and it changed *everything*. Most of all perhaps it made us all too aware of how fragile and vulnerable we are in this world in which we live. Feelings of fragility and vulnerability can make us very fearful of the world and the people around us, and, if we are not careful, as we seek to isolate ourselves from the pain that traumatic events can cause, we run the very great risk of isolating ourselves from everything that is wonderful in the world, as well. As this anniversary approached those familiar images of that terrible day have resurfaced - images that I think are truly indelibly etched on all of our minds; images that are hard to forget. So, as we remember this event again on this 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary I think we stand between memory and hope. The memory and the pain of that day echoes in us still, but the past ten years also bear witness that hope and courage, and faith in our ability to heal and move beyond pain are also persistent companions.

As we stand on this threshold, this shadow land between grievous memory and the promise of unfolding hope I think forgiveness, true, deep God focused forgiveness, is the very thing that builds the bridge that we walk over to true and complete healing. I am not one for much magical thinking when it comes to belief, but I find it a lovely grace filled serendipity that the very scriptures for this day are dripping with God's gift of forgiveness.

These passages were not specially selected for this day, but on a day that marks the anniversary of an event that altered the shape and course of the entire global community, how marvelous that Christians all over the world are offered the invitation from our regular Lectionary cycle to grapple with the arithmetic of forgiveness!

We see the gift of forgiveness that Joseph has for his brothers, and how God can use the worst things we can do to one another to the greater good of all. We see it in Paul's pleading in his Letter to the Romans to love one another and not to seek to find judgment with one another, and then, in the Gospel, we hear Jesus, who is the fulfillment of all of these images of mercy and grace, teach us that God's call for forgiveness is without limit and exponential.

We hear Peter ask Jesus, "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" That sounds generous in the extreme, at least to me; and, if any of you have ever had to forgive anyone even more than one time, that second time feels like a pretty far road to travel.

So, now we hear Jesus say, "No, Peter! Not seven times, but seventy-seven times" - or in some translations seventy times seven, all of which is to say---- as many times as it takes—7x7 represents a nonsensically large, uncountable number. And of course we cannot ignore the very troubling parable Jesus tacks on to this divine math lesson, but I am going to try my very best!

\*Last week I said that in the end the gospel always calls us to focus not on our brokenness, but on God's love and I what I hear most loudly in Jesus' parable is that the call to forgive exponentially concentrates us on the forgiveness of a loving God who, having made us, knows of what we are made.

One of the many wonderful things about this God whom we serve is that God values our sincerity over our perfection. God knows our weaknesses and utterly delights in transforming our weakness into wholeness. Thank heavens that this God who made us does not make perfect performance a criterion for God's love.<sup>1</sup>

As we stumble around in our lives, God forgives us our spiritual darkness's and our private destructions, God forgives our pettiness, and our lack of generosity in the face of another's transgressions. God forgives our blindness and our denials.<sup>2</sup> In this light I believe that what Jesus seeks to teach us most in this troubling parable is that we simply cannot understand or offer the forgiveness of God until we ourselves have learned to forgive.

Our downfall is often that we want mercy for ourselves but we want to exact justice for the remainder of humankind. God on the other hand, as this parable illustrates, desires justice, but when justice is too pale a thing and devoid of hope, God gives mercy. God gives mercy like a rushing river, God dispenses mercy like a running stream.

Jesus teaches us that forgiveness is the way to wholeness. In modern psychological terms: forgiveness is the way to mental health, to personal growth, to independence of emotions; forgiveness is the way to freedom of the soul.<sup>3</sup>

Among Jesus' last words on the cross were words of forgiveness. Suffering at the hands of those he came to deliver, his last act was to show us the true heart of God by forgiving us even as we were at our worst. It is when we truly learn to forgive that we become the best of who God created us to be.

<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief*, Liguori/Triumph, Liguori, Missouri, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

And if we cannot grasp the nature of true forgiveness, as Joan Chittister says, "Well that just leaves us stewing in the juices of the snake that bit us."

There are two kinds of forgiveness she says---and one of these is healthy and one is not; one is of God and the other is what she calls a kind of pious affectation---this latter version is an expedient form of forgiveness that leaves us bereft and wondering why it didn't work.

Expedient forgiveness is the kind we make for the sake of a false peace—we say we have moved on, but the reality is that we still carry the deep pain in our heart. This premature forgiveness simply doesn't work. All it does is substitute forced silence for the genuine, trusting relationship might have been deepened or begun in true forgiveness.

I think another important thing to remember this morning is that Peter's question is, "Lord if another member of the church *sins* against me, how often should I forgive?"

This important exchange between Jesus and his disciples isn't about pointing out some hurtful but basically benign misunderstanding---such things happen in the course of human relationships all the time and though we often like to whip them up into more than we should--- but they do not necessarily equate to sin.

Sin is when real harm has been done, when trust has been betrayed, and we have sought our own personal advantage over what is right and good; sin happens in that moment we wound or slay the heart of another. Cheap forgiveness will not do in such times; it will not suffice.<sup>4</sup>

But real forgiveness, the kind of forgiveness God extends to us every day, relies on our acknowledgement that we have either been truly wounded or that we have truly wounded another. This kind of forgiveness can take a bit more time and it is full acceptance for the human condition: People do horrible things---sometimes even "good" people do horrible things—think of Peter and his threefold denial of Jesus even moments after swearing to stay beside him even unto death. Peter was not evil, Peter was just scared and frightened and so he wounded and betrayed this man that he loved so much.

What Jesus is teaching us today I think is that when *true* forgiveness happens, then all of the fractures in our relationships can be repaired and forgiveness can be both total and lasting. This is so because as Jesus teaches us that in this type of forgiveness we receive something far greater than justice as I mentioned before---we encounter mercy!

When mercy is given or mercy is received the whole equation of forgiveness unfolds into God's infinite grace and healing. And it is important to recognize that true forgiveness of ourselves or others does not lie in relativising the harm or injury that has been committed. But by accepting or granting true forgiveness, it is then that we begin to build the bridge that moves us beyond the sin altogether. This is divine forgiveness---the awareness that although sin has been committed, the spirit is able to be restored to wholeness.<sup>5</sup> And as we remember this important anniversary of 9/11, we know that we are not the first to experience such a huge rent in the fabric of our nation or in our understanding of humanity. Going to Joan Chittister again she shares this prayer that was reportedly found pinned to a dead body when the concentration camps in Germany were liberated:

O Lord,  
Remember not only the men and women of goodwill, But all those of ill will.  
But do not remember all of the suffering  
They have inflicted upon us;  
Remember the fruits we have bought because of this suffering---  
Our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility,  
Our courage, our generosity,  
The greatness of heart  
Which has grown out of all of this;  
And when they come to judgment,  
Let all the fruits which we have borne  
Be their forgiveness. Amen.

When we choose forgiveness true peace comes. If we seek retribution rather than a new beginning, then we reproduce evil in abundance and we repeat evil everywhere.<sup>6</sup> This day and always Christ calls us to another way.

Forgiveness comes with the promise of hope; it brings us to that place that is free of fear - a place that embraces the world around us in all of its complexity, both the complexity of who we as individuals as well as who we are as a nation and global community.

Forgiveness is the bridge that allows us to pass from bitter memory to exuberant hope. As a people of faith, forgiveness is the wealth that God gives us in great measure so that we might *spend it indiscriminately* in God's world. Amen.

This year your Vestry and I have made growing into closer community our primary focus. We are still attending to the budget, the properties and all of the things that vestries do---that work is always before us. But the vitality of all of those things is born and grows stronger only as we form deeper bonds with one another and the mission we share as a family of faith. The upcoming Newcomer program, the All Parish Potlucks, the various Commissionings for our ministries, the birthday and anniversary announcements, our Stewardship focus, Adult Forums, Wednesday Bible Studies, Rite 13 and J2A for our youth---all of it is designed with building community in mind. So look for every opportunity coming our way and let's be that strong, loving, vital family of faith which I am positive God is forming us to be! Amen and alleluia!  
Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.