

## The Power of Forgiveness

Before I settled on the simple one word title of “Reconciliation” for last week’s sermon, I thought of calling it something like, “Being the Beloved Community, Part 1.” Ultimately, I decided that was too long and complicated, although I’ve certainly done such things before. Some of you may remember that I’ve even stolen a title of that nature from George Lucas. Several years ago, I titled my sermon on the first chapter of I Peter, “Episode IV: A New Hope.” But I digress... My thinking behind that longer title that I didn’t use last week has to do with the core message of the words of Jesus I focused on last week as well as the message from his words we will look at this week; two passages that are part of the same chapter in Matthew and which are, to me anyway, inextricably entwined.

The sermon title I ultimately used last week, “Reconciliation,” was my attempt to encapsulate the message of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20, a pericope our pew Bibles entitles “Reproving Another Who Sins.” “Reproving Another Who Sins?” Yuck. If you heard what I had to say last Sunday, you may remember that I emphasized taking the steps that Jesus recommends for solving an interpersonal conflict in a spirit of love and humility, not unlike the open natures of the children whom Jesus holds up as exemplars for us just a few verses earlier. I think reconciliation is a far more apt description of what Jesus is guiding us to than reproof. The longer I study the Scriptures, the more I become convinced that Jesus was (and is) all about creating community, beloved community, that includes all who would come as well as the One he called Father, our Loving Creator. Going around reproving people is not a great way to create community, something about which I still need to remind myself on a regular basis. Reproving people can be fun because it makes us feel righteous. But it makes the one reproved feel pretty crummy. As Jesus might say, it binds their sin to them when what Jesus was about was setting people free from their sins. And it binds their sin to us, too, giving us a false sense of spiritual superiority. The only way to release both those who have sinned against us and ourselves from the sin committed is through forgiveness. Forgiveness is part two of becoming and being the Beloved Community.

Or, ignoring the order in which they appear in Matthew’s Gospel, perhaps forgiveness is part one and reconciliation is part two. Or maybe they are one and one-A. Generally speaking, although not always, the goal of forgiveness would seem to be reconciliation and reconciliation seems impossible without forgiveness. To reconcile, Webster’s New World Dictionary tells us, is “to make friendly again or win over to a friendly attitude; to settle a quarrel; to bring into harmony; to make content...” The same source defines forgive as: “to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; stop being angry with; pardon...” If you try to reconcile with someone without forgiveness, then the two of you are still walking around all bound up. It makes taking their hand in friendship or embracing them as sister or brother awfully hard.

Peter, at least, seems to also connect reconciliation with forgiveness. No sooner has Jesus walked them through the mechanics of working on reconciliation with a brother or sister who has offended you than Peter is piping up with a question about forgiveness. He seems, as the disciples do from time to time in the gospels, to be engaging in a little apple polishing, currying favor with the Master by asking a question in a way he thinks will make him look good. “Lord,” he says, “if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

## The Power of Forgiveness

Now, we have the advantage of know what Jesus says in response. Let's try to set that aside for a minute and give poor old Peter the benefit of the doubt. There is pretty solid evidence that rabbis of Jesus' time taught that God would forgive repeated and premeditated sin up to three times but not beyond. They based this teaching on a passage in Job which talks about God redeeming sinners three times and another passage in Amos which seems to indicate that four transgressions will cause the wrath of God to fall. Now, Peter may have already learned a few things from Jesus. He may have gathered that an overly literal interpretation of the scriptures was not his Teacher's style, for example, based on his treatment of the Sabbath laws. And he may have begun to figure out that Jesus' view of God was of a loving, forgiving parent. So Peter probably thought he was right in Jesus' wheelhouse when he suggested forgiving an errant friend seven times. Hey, that's twice as many as the rabbis say, plus one! And seven's a God number, right; the whole six days of creation plus the Sabbath thing?

Peter must have been stunned when he didn't get Jesus' approval. For those of us of a certain age, I sort of imagine this like an Ed McMahon and Johnny Carson sketch: "Wouldn't it be great if I forgave my brother SEVEN times? Hohohoho." "Not so fast there, fish breath." Jesus proceeds to blow the traditional limit on forgiveness right out of the water. Not just seven times but seventy-seven times! Or, depending on the translation, seventy-times-seven times, four hundred and ninety. Ok, maybe this is actually Laurel and Hardy: "But, how am I going to keep track of all those forgives, Ollie?" "Precisely, Stanley." And then Jesus tells the one about the king who forgives one of his servants a multi-billion dollar debt and the guy beats up some other guy over twelve grand. What a riot!

Except this is a very peculiar kind of humor. No matter how entertainingly or drily this is presented, Jesus is telling his disciples (a group that includes us, by the way) that they will be held responsible for how they/we walk through the world, how we bind and loose sins, to refer again to last week's passage, how we forgive. And that's a pretty sobering challenge.

How do we do with that challenge? Once again, I'm going to begin by pointing the finger squarely at myself. There are some people in my life who have hurt me deeply. And, because I really do try to be a good disciple of Jesus, I have worked hard at forgiving them. But, here's the thing: I just got done telling you a few minutes ago that I think the ultimate goal of forgiveness is reconciliation, the creation of the Beloved Community. And I am not, frankly, in community with some of those people who have hurt me over the years. Now, I've got a couple of really good excuses for that. First of all, the people I'm especially thinking of live halfway across the country. I am not physically near them, so I can't be in community, right? And, of course, that's eyewash because modern technology means we can be in community with people who live halfway across the globe, not just the continent. There's the telephone and e-mail and Facebook and Twitter. There's even the U.S. Postal Service, quaint as that might seem. Physical distance is not a barrier to community.

My second excuse is that at least two of these people are serial offenders, which is to say that they behave in hurtful ways to me seemingly every chance they get. Now, this excuse, or reason, is a little more complicated. One of the things I have learned and taught over the years is that loving one's neighbor as one loves oneself does indeed require appropriate love of self. That means taking care of oneself in body, mind, and spirit. Now, if I continually subject myself to

## The Power of Forgiveness

abuse, either physical or mental, I'm not taking very good care of myself. That would seem to indicate that forgiveness to a serial offender is important for my own spiritual health but that reconciliation in a way that puts me in continual contact with that person might be deleterious to my spiritual or even physical health. That's a conundrum.

This conundrum is solved in part if we consider that true reconciliation requires a sense of healthy community. Webster's, remember, tells us that reconciliation is about a "friendly attitude" and "harmony." If someone is continuing to be abusive in a relationship, they are not showing a friendly attitude or pursuing true harmony. And it's certainly true that part of a healthy reconciliation and community can be about reproof, handled with love and humility. Some behaviors are destructive and should not be allowed to continue in a relationship or community. Interventions can be necessary to bring a brother or sister to wholeness. That's why last week's lesson from Jesus included how to involve a mediator or, if necessary, a group from the shared community. I don't believe that Jesus prescription for solving disputes involves shunning and if you read this morning's Times you'll know why I mention that.

This is why I would say to a sister or a brother who is suffering in an abusive relationship, "Forgive, by all means, but remember that true reconciliation can only come when your safety is assured." There has been a great deal of attention in the press of late to domestic violence due to the sad incident of professional football player Ray Rice and his then-fiancée, now-wife, Janay Palmer Rice. While I am absolutely appalled by the conduct of Ray Rice and find the response of Janay Rice to be troubling, my first caveat is that none of us and none of the media that are metaphorically baying for Mr. Rice's blood know what is going on in that relationship other than what we may have seen from that one videotape. Mrs. Rice may have good reason to "stand by her man." This may have been a completely isolated, out-of-character incident for them. She may be absolutely convinced of his remorse and repentance and she may have good reason for being so. But if I were her pastor, I would ask her one question: are you afraid of him? Not, "do you love him" or "do you think he can change?" "Are you afraid of him?" And if the answer was "yes," then my advice to her would be to remove herself from any sense of danger, to take reconciliation slowly and carefully, and to use trained mediators. When someone has committed an act of evil, we do, in the name of Christ, owe them the chance to repent and make amends but we do them no favors by encouraging them to transgress again. Part of reconciliation is encouraging health in each other.

There is another horn to the dilemma of forgiveness and reconciliation with those who continue to sin against us. That is the example of Jesus himself. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome that, "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." He goes on to say, just one verse later and then repeatedly that the death of Jesus produced reconciliation between us and God. Jesus told us to forgive beyond counting and he forgave even those who drove the nails into his hands and feet. He put himself in danger by going to Jerusalem when he knew the authorities sought his death. As disciples of Jesus, are we called to follow him even to this extreme? To be willing to put ourselves in danger for the slim chance of rescuing a broken relationship, of contributing to the healing of a sick soul?

This question has been haunting me since Tuesday morning. My friend Susanne Kromberg is the director of spiritual care at Swedish Edmonds and a member of my lectionary study group.

## The Power of Forgiveness

Some of you met her when she came to our adult Sunday School with two of her colleagues to talk to us about the Society of Friends or, as they are better known, the Quakers. On Tuesday, she posted on Facebook a blog from Gospel World View entitled “I John, ISIS and the Gospel Versus Terror.” In that blogpost, Alice Su, an American refugee relief worker and freelance journalist posted in Amman, Jordan, reflected on her interaction with some of the Christian refugees from the rapidly expanding war being waged by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or the Levant, as some have it). I cannot, for time’s sake, read you the whole of the post, which is deeply moving, but I do want to read a section that is most applicable to the question of forgiveness and reconciliation and where we draw the line:

“If God is worth more than my life, then I die. I give my whole life as He did: not as a warrior, but as a sheep. He did not fight. We are not to fight. We are to give our entire lives to our brothers and sisters so that they do not feel alone, so that they have hope, so that we walk steadily into Darkness to take people’s hands and tell them, We have one Father. He loves us. He is good.

“I would think this entirely crazy if I had not met Christians here who live it out in steady, fearless humility. I sit with brothers and sisters from Sudan, Syria, Iraq, places falling apart and families that attacked them when they decided to follow Christ. I wonder why they are not running away. *Praise God, I’m going back!* they say...

“My brothers and sisters spill over with light and peace. I want to hold them back. I am afraid they will be hurt or killed today, tomorrow or the day after. They laugh and lay a hand on my shoulder. *Sister, my family needs hope.* What, the family that wants to kill you? *Sister, my people are trapped. They cannot leave. They need hope, and we have the one and only Hope. We’ve got to go and serve.*

“My Palestinian brothers tell me that they can and will continue to pray for all their neighbors, Muslims Jews and Christians, radical or not, Zionist or Hamas, even as they are being bombed from one side and targeted by the other. They tell me, this is what it means to follow Jesus: to suffer for your neighbor’s good, and your neighbor includes every person no matter if they hate or love you.

“My Coptic friends in Egypt say, *someone tried to burn down our church. But we will not take up arms to fight.*

“My Iraqi sister says, *I am going back. ISIS is there, yes, which means people are afraid. Everyone is desperate. Our world is burning. So we need Christ. So I’m going.*

“*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. – 1 John 4:18-19*”

I do not know how to process what these refugees are telling Alice Su. I don’t know if they are incredibly brave and faithful or if they are mentally unbalanced because of the traumas they have endured. I truly do not know. And I do not know what I would do in their place. But the

## The Power of Forgiveness

Scriptures that Alice Su quotes are Scriptures that I have tried to honor and live by all my life; that I know.

And I know this, that God is forgiveness and love and reconciliation. And I know that for me and for all of us who have chosen to follow Jesus that Jesus is the fullest self-revelation of God to humankind. And Jesus said, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” And Jesus taught us to pray, “Father, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.” And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

These are heavy thoughts on this celebratory Sunday as we rejoice in being together again for the fall and the winter and the spring to come. But it is because of God’s forgiveness that we are able to celebrate and, in our own willingness to forgive each other, we will find our community expanded and deepened, a true family of God. As we accept each other, warts and all, we will also find acceptance. May God grant that the school year ahead be one in which we find a richer deeper reconciliation with God and with each other. Amen.