

“Learning Forgiveness”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2010
Scripture: 43:16-21
Matthew 18:23-35

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Great God, you are rich in mercy and forgiveness beyond our knowing. Show us what we need to understand, and help us to learn how to practice forgiveness in all our relationships, so that we might experience the renewal of the life you offer us in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

There was a pilot with three passengers...a boy scout, a priest, and an atomic scientist...and a plane which developed engine trouble in mid-flight. The pilot rushed back to the passenger compartment and exclaimed, “The plane is going down! We have only three parachutes, and there are four of us! I have a family waiting for me at home. I must survive!” With that, he grabbed one of the parachutes and jumped out of the plane.

The atomic scientist jumped to his feet at this point and declared, “I am the smartest man in the world. It would be a great tragedy if my life were to be snuffed out!” With that, he too, grabbed a parachute and exited the plane. With an alarmed look on his face, the priest said to the Boy Scout, “My son, I have no family. I am ready to meet my Maker. You are still young with much ahead of you. You take the last parachute.”

At this point, the Boy Scout interrupted the priest, “Hold on, Father. Don’t say any more. We are both alright! The world’s smartest man just jumped out of the plane wearing my backpack.”

Isn’t it interesting how a new perspective can change our outlook - from bleak to bright with just with just a few well-chosen words?

Perhaps more than any other message from the passages we have read thus far during the Season of Lent this year, this message is one

we need most in the Church. So often churches get caught up in trying to do things the way they have always been done, that the church is left out of step with the majority of society. Even worse, it leaves many contemporary people wondering if the Church has anything relevant to say to them. Tragically, when churches get caught in this pattern, they put more emphasis on preserving traditions of the past than they do in reaching new people with the message of Christ. As this shift in emphasis takes place, the Church becomes “our” church rather than the Church of Jesus Christ. Its power and vitality are lost and they cannot be reclaimed until the Church recommits itself to seeking the direction of God’s spirit.

In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah God speaks directly to this need in our churches. The prophet Isaiah recorded these words of God: “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” That is God’s desire for God’s people and God’s Church in every generation. And while I am sure there are those of you who hear these words and think, “Here we go again, another sermon on change and growth”. As important as that is, though and as likely as it would be for growth to be a bi-product, the “new thing” God promises is not really about church growth. What God is promising here is his willingness to forgive us, and his commandment that we forgive one another.

We know that we are bidden to forgive one another as God, in Christ, has forgiven us. In fact, it is difficult to miss all the references in the Gospels to this basic expression of the Christian calling. We find it at the heart of the Lord’s Prayer. While each faith tradition seems to use different words, the idea behind the words is, “And forgive us our sins, as we forgive others who sin against us.” It is embedded in Jesus’ teaching on judging others in Luke’s Gospel: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

Now, for sure, Jesus uses hyperbole – or exaggeration – to respond to Peter’s question about how many times he should forgive a church

member who sins against him. Peter assumes that seven times would be generous, but in the words of Matthew’s Gospel preceding the words we read this morning, Jesus tells him, “not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

But nowhere do we find a more arresting picture of the reason for forgiving others as in Jesus’ “Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.” It would be striking enough, and, to be honest, much easier to swallow, without the final two verses. The king, as I am sure you realized, is the figure of God in this cautionary tale, and each of us is invited to see ourselves in the unforgiving servant.

And one thing we really need to pay attention to is the monetary sums in this story. Otherwise the point of the story will have far less meaning for us 21st century hearers than it had for Jesus’ original hearers. You see, a denarius was the customary daily wage for a common laborer, making the smaller debt worth about three and half months of labor. A talent was worth more than fifteen years of ordinary wages; ten thousand talents would represent a debt beyond 150,000 years of common labor, an astronomical sum by any standard!

So, my friends, Jesus’ point is that God has already forgiven us this unbelievable debt and expects us in turn to forgive the smaller debts of others. In addition, Jesus is uncomfortably direct about the destructive consequences of failing to forgive others.

The sense in most New Testament teachings is that forgiving others is imperative, not optional. Jesus is not merely inviting or suggesting forgiveness. Spiritually speaking we are obliged to forgive one another. But this is easier said than done, as is illustrated by another story from early desert wisdom, which I will share with you in the original translation:

“Certain of the brethren said to Abba Anthony: We would like you to tell us some word, by which we may be saved. Then the elder said, “You have heard the Scriptures, they ought to be enough for you. But they said: We want to hear something also from you, Father. The elder

answered them: You have heard the Lord say: If a man strikes you on the left cheek, show him also the other one. They said to him: This we cannot do. He said to them: If you can't turn the other cheek, at least take it patiently on one of them. They replied: We can't do that either. He said: If you cannot even do that, at least do not go on striking others more than you would want them to strike you. They said: We cannot do this either. Then the elder said to his disciple: Go cook up some food for these brethren, for they are very weak. Finally he said to them: If you cannot even do this, how can I help you? All I can do is pray."

We chuckle, but isn't that really how we live? Truly forgiving someone who has hurt us is never easy. And our weakness is rooted in both human emotion and our reasoned sense of justice and of "fair play". As I think about the way in which our emotions block our desire to forgive, it seems to me that there are two basic types of emotional response. The first is: "I know I should, but I don't want to" and the second is: "I can't yet."

In the first instance, there is a distinct element of satisfaction in feeling resentment when such resentment may be easily justified. And feeling wounded or offended is generally sufficient justification. These feelings are often based in ego needs. There is little question that we enjoy a certain amount of complaining to others how unjustly we have been treated. It can be good exercise in self-examination to ask how much of what we feel is legitimate, and how much simply makes a juicy-good story of victimhood to elicit sympathy from others.

I am sure that each and every one of us can recall a time in our lives, when we were unable to forgive someone for the way in which they hurt us. But I wouldn't be surprised, that if we are honest, we can remember that the details we shared with those close to us may have been embellished just a bit, and that our part in the story has been only victim and not actor in any way. On the other hand, if we can set those feelings aside for just a minute, we might see that, as initially painful as the situation was, God could

use it for good. The moment we lift our eyes to the divine initiative, we may clearly see behind the surface facts, and often we may feel, no longer aggrieved, but relieved.

And then, there are times when our truthful response to the call to forgive is, "I can't yet." "I can't yet" is a perfectly honest and reasonable response and may even be the healthiest response under some circumstances. For example, when someone has experienced repeated abuse – physical or emotional – if the abuser is forgiven too quickly, the action is of no benefit to either the abuser or the abused. Forgiving becomes meaningless and the abuser feels he or she has been given a clean slate and can continue in the same pattern. There are times when we are so deeply wounded that it will take time – sometimes a long time – before sufficient inner healing prepares the story of our hearts to nurture the fruit of forgiveness.

As I was working on my sermon for today, I kept hearing in my mind the words which are a part of our liturgy every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. As a part of what are called "The Words of Institution", I quote Jesus by saying, "This is the new covenant sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Friends this is the new thing God is doing- do you not perceive it? Next week the focus of our series on forgiveness will be the connections and distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation. And in the meantime, I remind you of the words of a hymn we often use as a response to our Prayer of Confession:

"Forgive our sins as we forgive, you taught us, Lord, to pray, but you alone can grant us grace to live the words we say."

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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