

Genesis 50:15-21 ~ Matthew 18:21-35
Glimpses of Heaven on Earth: The Practice of Forgiving (2nd of 6)
 16th Sunday after Pentecost ~ September 17, 2023
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Gospel text

"So, just how *many* times do I have to forgive someone? As many as seven, Jesus?" More than doubling the traditional number of three times, Peter probably thought seven times was way over the top. Ridiculously generous. But leave it to Jesus—instead of telling Peter, "Sure, seven to ten would do it," he used numbers as props in a fantastic, almost cartoonish story to help Peter and us see in a new way, what God's infinite, inscrutable grace looks like. Watch how Jesus deftly uses the numbers 7, 77, 10,000 talents, and 1 denarius, to shapeshift and launch the answer into the global orbit of God's generosity. Watch and listen as Jesus spins an incredible, unforgettable, story of grace. An *unsettling* of accounts bringing heaven on earth through disproportionate forgiveness.

Sermon

It happens here in worship, twice every Sunday. I'm talking about the word that starts with "F". It happens toward the beginning and near the end of worship. Every week. What word am I talking about? You guessed it: **forgiveness**. Forgiving and being forgiven. Quick game, without looking at your bulletins, raise your hand if you can name the two places where something about forgiveness is spoken or prayed. Every Sunday...Yes, you are right: at the "Assurance of God's Love and Mercy" and we pray it in the Lord's Prayer.

Easy to say. Hard to really do. Especially when we are the ones who have been wronged. Remember last Sunday, inspired by Paul's admonition in Romans, to "put on Christ" I asked "Who are you wearing?" We could add to that idea this week because *who* you are wearing depends in part on *what we are holding*. Like a grudge, for instance. This week's question could be, "What are you holding?" Like we were working on in Discovery Time with the children: those invisible grudges we hold in our hearts. Or the desire for revenge, for payback. If you choose the disarming "Armor of Light" (Romans 13:12), its power comes from compassion and forgiveness. From remembering who and whose you really are. The forgiven, unforgiven slave in Jesus' parable, forgot. And that was as his undoing.

We can shake our heads at him, sitting here in church on a Sunday morning. But let's be honest: the practice of forgiveness is complicated. It's messy. It is not a one and done thing. Revenge is as old as sin. We have a story even before Joseph and his badly behaving brothers. The first mythic brothers: Cain and Abel. This may be the story that Jesus that inspired the numbers that Jesus used with Peter. In Genesis 4:24 it says, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-seven-fold. Revenge, payback is as old as sin. Jesus knew how hard and messy forgiveness is. I think that's why it is embedded in the heart of the prayer he taught his disciples, and in the Last Supper he instituted.

What about this morning. Whom do you need to forgive today? This teaching of Jesus is so clear, it's scary. Not because it's an allegory where the "king" in the story is God. Nor because

forgiving is a quick clean, surgical intervention. It is clear because there's no compromise, no wiggle room, no caveat, or spin. Just a plain, simple, undiluted command, reinforced with a threat: Forgive—or else. Don't be a hypocrite like the slave in the story. If you are a friend of Jesus, You too, are living by grace. And grace alone. How can you pretend otherwise?

Whom do you need to forgive today? We have so many reasons not to: "He's a jerk. It was *her* fault. I *know* I'm right on this one. It's *not fair*. My life has been shattered by them." So many reasons *not* to. And one reason why we *have* to. If we are a friend of Christ; if our spirituality is rooted in the Christ tradition: forgiveness is our jam, friends. Our Christian tradition too often has played fast and loose with the call to forgive. As if it were easy, quick and clean. Say the magic word and it's all forgotten. Not hardly. All we have to do is take a good look at the truth our Bible tells us: from Cain and Abel to Joseph and his brothers, to Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. We want to think all is forgiven. Let's all just be friends again and call it good. But that is *not* what *this* Bible says.

Our Holy Bible addresses the loose ends, painful truths and lingering ambiguities in the practice of forgiveness. Yes, for better and for worse: we *are* our "brother's keeper." Did you notice in our first lesson, Joseph's brothers were scared that Joseph had not really forgiven them. They were *still* lying when they told Joseph, "Your father gave us this instruction before he died." In Jesus' parable, the prodigal son may have just been really hungry and more manipulative, than repentant. Jesus doesn't tell us that. Nor do we know whether the elder brother decided to join the party or not. Jesus is teaching us real lessons for real life.

Forgiveness is hard and it takes practice. We can take inspiration from real Christian communities who bear witness to the awesome power of authentic, Holy Spirit-powered forgiveness. It was their practice. It was who they are, so when disaster struck, they knew what Jesus called them to do. In Lancaster, PA, it was the Amish Community struck down by a gunman in 2006 who went into a school and shot ten girls, killing five of them. It was in Charleston, South Carolina, at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church where an admitted white supremacist came into their church and murdered nine people in 2015. Both of these communities chose to forgive what was unforgivable. They were able to do so because they had practiced putting on the Armor of Light every day and every night, as individuals and as a community of faith, friends of Christ. Not because it was easy. In these extreme cases it was probably one of the hardest things they ever did.

Keep in mind that forgiving does not necessarily mean becoming friends with those you have forgiven. When the risen Christ came back from the dead he chose to hang out with his friends—*not* his enemies. Yes, he forgave them. While hanging from the cross in agony he and prayed "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Forgiven, yes. Friends, maybe not. That is an important distinction for us, too. Forgiving someone doesn't mean you must maintain or rebuild a friendship with that person or group of people. Forgiving and re-friending are two different things.

What are you holding? Holding a grudge can be lethal to the spirit. As Martin Luther King, Jr often said, "Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die." St. Augustine of Hippo said the same thing about resentment. Choose your poison or cast-off hypocrisy and try on grace. Here is the good news, I pray you have the ears to hear and the heart to receive this morning: This release does not depend on our own willpower.

Ground yourself in God, let your roots go deep down in God's renewing ocean of grace. Who are you wearing? If you're not sure, ask yourself, "what are you holding?" As God told Cain, he could choose revenge or restoration. So can we. Settling scores or unsettling grace? Unsettling grace takes practice. Today we will get to practice it three times! Rather than just me yammering on about it in my sermon, I have chosen to use the rest of the sermon time to offer this prayer of release.

Here goes: Free your hands of whatever you might be holding, like just maybe your cell phone...Feet flat on the floor, feel your body being held by the pew or choir chair, relax the muscles in your face. Then take a breath or two, As we pray this prayer, "Loosen My Grip" by Ted Loder, make a fist with both hands (if you are able). As I read this prayer, let go and loosen those fists, slowly or quickly, or in whatever way that works for you. Let us pray:

*O God, it is hard for me to let go,
 most times,
 and the squeeze I exert
 garbles me and gnarls others...
 Loosen my grip
 on those grudges and grievances
 I hold so closely,
 that I may risk exposing myself
 to the spirit of forgiving and forgiveness
 that changes things and resurrects dreams and courage.*

*Loosen my grip
 on myself
 that I may experience the freedom of a fool
 who knows that to believe
 is to see kingdoms, find power, sense glory;
 to reach out
 is to know myself held;
 to laugh at myself
 is to be in on the joke of your grace;
 to attend to each moment
 is to hear the faint melody of eternity;
 to dare love is to smell the wild flowers of heaven.*

*Loosen my grip
 on my ways and words,
 on my fears and fretfulness
that letting go
 into the depths of silence
 and my own uncharted longings,
I may find myself held by you
 and linked anew to all life
 in this wild and wondrous world
 you love so much,
so I may take to heart
 that you have taken me to heart.ⁱ*

ⁱ Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, (Lura Media, San Diego, CA, 1984), p.48-49.