



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. LINZI STAHLECKER, CURATE

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 19A, SEPTEMBER 17, 2023

GENESIS 50:1-21; PSALM 103:1-13; ROMANS 14: 1-12; MATTHEW 18:21-35

“COME TO ME ALL YOU WHO ARE WEARY¹”

Matthew 18:21-35 *[Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”]*

When I was a child, I spent a lot of my time with my grandmother, my nan, she was the first great influence in my life. She was a small, fierce Jewish woman, with a hard

history. My nan’s parents were forced to flee Poland after the first world war. During the war, the country was torn apart, and afterwards it faced ongoing threats of

¹ Matthew 11-28

invasion on all sides. Its population turned to nationalism as a way forward. There were hostilities against Jews and other ethnic groups. The pogroms, anti-Jewish attacks, left homes, businesses and synagogues looted, burned, and destroyed.

Although her parents made it to London, the rest of my nan's family weren't so lucky, all of those who stayed behind and endured the pogroms were rounded up and killed in the holocaust.

My nan was born in the East end of London in the early 1920's and she grew up in an isolated immigrant enclave, speaking Yiddish as her first language.

She carried a lot of pain in her small body, a lot of pain, and trauma ... and a deep grief. And she was loving, she took good care of me, she loved a laugh, loved her nightly nip of scotch, she was a big Frank Sinatra fan, a highly-skilled and creative knitter... and yet my most abiding memory of my Nan is that she spent her life neck-deep in broigus.

Broigus is a Yiddish word I heard a lot as a child. A broigus is a feud, or a dispute, a falling out that's hurt feelings, and in my family they would rumble on. The original

hurt might even sometimes get forgotten, but the painful feelings up on the surface, feelings of bitterness and resentment, these would stay very present, causing their pain over and over again. It was like a kind of ongoing violence that impacted my nan's life, in significant ways.

Broigus would make itself felt in conversations, would hover over family gatherings, a broigus from the past was an ongoing reality in the present, able to create ever more issues that might start stacking up and eventually lead to irreparable breaks in relationships all over the place.

My nan carried the great and always-growing weight of all she couldn't forgive, all her life. I bore witness to the exhausting torture of broigus, I know she didn't choose it, I'm sure she believed there was no other way to be, no other way to respond to the hurt.

But there is – I learned later in life - another way. By his life, and through his teaching, Jesus offers us a radical understanding of the power and potential of forgiveness, that to this day is both resisted and often misunderstood. Jesus, the great reconciler, he lived so that we might be restored into fullness of relationship with God and with

one another. And so Jesus insisted that we love, that we love even our enemies, and he insisted that all are included in God's restored vision for this world – and he teaches us that we must pay attention to forgiveness.

Perhaps because we associate forgiving so strongly with forgetting ('forgive and forget') we can think forgiveness means setting aside our hurt and our pain, disregarding it, essentially saying to the one who's harmed us "it's all good." Shake hands, and move on. And yet, as many of us, perhaps even all of us know, the pain we can cause one another isn't so easily set aside, and some terrible hurts, woundings, traumas, are rightly unforgettable.

To forgive is not to forget, instead it's a way we might set down the heavy, stressful burden of resentment and reproach we might otherwise carry; the heavy, stressful burden of bitterness and ill-will that will impact and distort our thinking and our doing, and our ability to love. An unrelenting need for accountability or retribution is a torment repeatedly heaped atop the original hurt, heaped on top of the original wounding.

The forgiveness Jesus calls us to, like the love he preaches, is rarely simple, or easy, and it is

our choice to make. Jesus teaches that forgiveness can be a life-bringing way of responding to the broken world we live in, even to its injustices, its abuses. If we choose it, forgiveness will offer a freedom from the agony of revisiting again and again the judgements we've passed, the hostilities we feel, freedom from turning over in our minds what we need to hear by way of apology or repentance from those who've done us wrong.

Choosing forgiveness, is where our transformation can begin ... perhaps most importantly because forgiveness, the freedom of forgiveness clears the way, makes healing possible. Healing of the wounded self, for sure, and, maybe, the restoration of relationships that have been broken.

Our lives begin and end with our relationship to God. Jesus assures us of God's forgiveness, returning to God we're assured that nothing that we are or have done is able to, or will ever, separate us from the very ground of our being. Our relationship with God is where it begins and where it ends, it is the source of all life and love, it is the source of all healing. The forgiveness that draws us ever closer to God is the same restoring forgiveness we can

choose to let transform our life and our world.

Our forgiveness is not a free pass for the one who has done harm; forgiveness doesn't excuse or deny the suffering caused by wrong-doing; forgiveness places no obligation on the one wounded to restore or repair a broken relationship ... the repentance of those who have harmed plays an essential role in any restoration that might be possible.

Forgiveness is instead the starting place, it is where we begin ... set free from the torment of any need to retaliate, unburdened from any need or desire to punish, or to hurt in return for the harms we've experienced ourselves. Free from the torture of waiting for an apology that never comes. Forgiveness is a freedom my nan never knew, and a possible pathway to healing from the great traumas of her life that she never found.

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."²

Forgiveness is perhaps as hard today as it ever was, and much like loving our enemies, it's way easier to talk about than it is to live. But, we do have a way to get there as followers of Jesus, an invitation, an unburdening – it's our choice to make.

² Matthew 11:28-30