



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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EXODUS 12:1-14; PSALM 149; MATTHEW 18:15-20

FORGIVENESS AND THIS CRUCIBLE MOMENT

Matthew 18:15-20 [Jesus said, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”]

At first blush, this passage from Matthew’s gospel may appear to be about judgment—giving license to judge another church member has sinned against you, and you are instructed to go and point that sin out to them. If they don’t listen, do it again, this time with one or two others. And if they still do not recant then banish them. Judge and jury to exact punitive retribution. There...justice served. They got what they deserved. It’s been interpreted that way by some with disastrous consequences.

But that is not what this passage is really about. The arc of Matthew’s 18th chapter, of which these few verses serve as a pivot, is about forgiveness. Jesus devotes a lot of attention in the gospels to the work of forgiveness. He knew it to be an essential piece of the vision he cast for God’s reign—the fullness of justice.

“forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us...” the only petition in the Lord’s Prayer with a dependent clause reminding us that forgiveness catalyzes the

healing of relationships best when we see it as bidirectional opportunity. And the prayer claims that God is in the midst of it all—the root of inspiration to forgive.

The next verse in Matthew’s gospel following these verses will serve as the bridge to next week’s parable—in that next verse Peter asks Jesus, “ Lord, if a member of the church sins against me, how many times should I forgive? Seven times?” To which Jesus says, “not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

That is, a lot. A lifetime. The work is never really finished. And what we don’t get done on earth, will be bound in heaven, which I take to mean, that we are afforded the opportunity to tend to the unfinished details of this life when we take up the next. (Maybe that sounds more like Hell to some...)

I don’t know what that looks like, but it gives me pause. What we might hear today is Jesus saying, is forgiveness is the keystone to the arch of Christian life. It is our work to embrace, whether we want to or not.

A year ago this month I taught a three-week series on the *Art of Forgiveness* drawing mostly on Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s

pastoral theology of forgiveness gathered up and expressed most beautifully in *The Book of Forgiving* which he co-wrote with his daughter Mpho. He opens the book with an account of Mrs. Mhlawuli, whose husband Sicelo was tortured and murdered by a group who hated him simply for the color of his skin. She shared the horrific details eleven years after his death with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. He had 43 stab wounds in all, she said; they poured acid on his face, cut off his right hand. Then her daughter Babalwa spoke to the Commission. She was just eight when they killed her father. She described the hardship since her father died, the grief, the police harassment and their cruel disinterest in solving the crime. “I want to know who killed my father...we want to forgive them, but we don’t know who to forgive.” Tutu said he was left breathless by her words, and they echo in our ears even today.

I’m no expert on the art of forgiveness; I only know it is the work to which Jesus relentlessly calls us.

Archbishop Tutu concluded that for South Africa, there would be no future without forgiveness. And he discovered two central truths that guide his understanding of forgiveness: 1) there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and 2) no one is undeserving of forgiveness.

Now I don't know about you, but that stops me short every time I consider it. Nothing is unforgiveable, and no one is undeserving of forgiveness. Surely that cannot be true. But if we unpack it a bit more, if we return to our bedrock belief that the goodness of God's image is stirred into every soul. And we can say that no one is born a criminal, no one is born cruel, and if we believe that, then maybe, just maybe, we can move beyond the cutting pain of being wronged, to see the other for who they truly are—a fellow human, a fellow child of God. And perhaps we might also see the gift that forgiveness is to the one forgiving, regardless of what the other chooses to do with it.

It's important to note that forgiveness is not whimsical or easy; I do not wish to come across frivolous here, or to sound dismissive of the terrible things we do to one another.

No one can force another to forgive, and it demands an honest reckoning. Forgiveness is not weak submission, nor is it a subversion of justice, nor is it just forgetting about it.

Forgiveness may take years, or a lifetime, or perhaps even heavenly unbinding...

Tutu's proposed path to forgiveness has four steps: 1) telling the story truthfully, 2) Naming the hurt, 3) Recognize shared humanity with the other, and 4) Renew or release the relationship.

Sometimes forgiveness can serve as the means by which you find release from the stranglehold of power the other has held over you all this time. Release. But we all intuitively know there are no short cuts here.

And it takes great effort and intentionality to move away from the very human impulses of revenge. The pain we feel when wronged is often a prompt to harm another in response, to put the blinders on and reject their humanity, to retaliate, seek revenge or payback, which will exact pain in the other. It becomes a vicious cycle.

Which brings me back to judgment.

You've heard me say before that the Greek word for judgment used in the gospels is *krisis*, from which we get our word *crisis*. This crisis, this judgment, is something like a fork in the road, a decision point. Stay in the path of the revenge cycle hurtling pain upon pain, or take the off ramp toward the path of forgiveness. Truth-telling, naming the hurt, recognizing the shared humanity, and renew or release the relationship.

Surely we can say that our nation is in crisis, when at every turn things seem to have eroded into a cycle of warring tribalism—revenge cycle run amok. We have judgments to make about how we are going to proceed.

We have a choice, individually and collectively, about how we choose to live. Our future hangs in the balance, folks.

Forgiveness is the harder road, to be sure, but if we steer that way, not seeking short cuts, but living in the discomfort of truth-

telling, and naming the hurt, and discovering our shared humanity together, then it might just be possible.

How long will it take, or how much before we crest the hill? Jesus gives us a hint: seventy-seven times, he says. That is, a lot. Perhaps a lifetime. Maybe more.

And I believe Tutu is on to something, too: that nothing is unforgiveable, and no one is undeserving of forgiveness, hard as that may seem in this crucible moment.

Reference

Tutu, Desmond and Mpho Tutu. *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. Harper One, 2014.

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