

Forgiveness...the gift that sets us free Creation 1 – 13 September 2020

This week's Gospel picks up right after last week's Gospel.

Peter has approached Jesus to ask a fairly innocent question...“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

Jesus' answer is nothing short of astounding, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Sorry, what did you say? Seventy-seven times?

Uhmhhh, seventy-seven times? I'm pretty sure I'm not that magnanimous.

One of my favourite authors is Brené Brown. Of forgiveness she writes, “Forgiveness is so difficult because it involves death and grief. I had been looking for patterns in people extending generosity and love, but not in people feeling grief. At that moment it struck me: Given the dark fears we feel when we experience loss, nothing is more generous and loving than the willingness to embrace grief in order to forgive. To be forgiven is to be loved.” (from Rising Strong)

The gospel continues with yet another parable. This is the parable of the unforgiving servant. In summary, the servant is unable to repay a loan to his master. His loan is forgiven after pleading for mercy and that mercy is granted, to give him more time to repay the loan. That same servant sees a fellow slave who owes him less than one tenth of the loan he himself owes. The fellow slave begs for mercy, yet instead of extending the mercy shown to him, he throws the man in jail. Witnesses to these exchanges then go to the master and share what they witnessed.

This is difficult enough to reconcile, that he would not extend the same mercy given him with a fellow slave. The one who granted him mercy then has him tortured.

Harsh.

THEN we are told God will do that and worse to those of us who refuse to forgive our “siblings” from our heart.

Um, okay.

What happens if the person who has harmed us does not apologise? Or their apology is not a “good” apology?

Have you ever had someone give you a non-apology? Someone who has wronged you and instead of offering a sincere apology they say something like:

“I'm sorry your feelings are hurt” rather than “I'm sorry I hurt your feelings”.

Or “All I can do is apologise” rather than “I am sincerely sorry”.

I mean, I'm supposed to forgive THAT kind of nonsense?

I'm at a point in my life, if someone says "Sorry" I usually ask why. "Why are you sorry?" It's amazing what I've learned from my step-children when they aren't sure what I know and what I don't know. Know what I mean?

God tells us, basically, forgive fully, from your heart, or face my wrath. That hardly seems fair, does it?

First we have to understand just what forgiveness is, and what it is not.

Desmond Tutu, says of forgiveness, "To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. It is also a process that does not exclude hatred and anger. These emotions are all part of being human. You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things: The depth of your love is shown by the extent of your anger. However, when I talk of forgiveness, I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person. A better person than one being consumed by anger and hatred. Remaining in that state locks you in a state of victimhood, making you almost dependent on the perpetrator. If you can find it in yourself to forgive, then you are no longer chained to the perpetrator. You can move on, and you can even help the perpetrator to become a better person, too." (quoted by Brené Brown in Rising Strong)

Forgiveness is hard work. How mind-blowing is it to understand that forgiveness does not exclude hatred and anger? I always believed (wrongly) that if I forgave someone I was not allowed to remain hurt and angry. Now I know differently.

Forgiveness is a process and a difficult one at that. If someone has hurt us deeply we are NOT expected to simply "forgive and forget". In fact, that mentality is dangerous as it opens us up to be harmed again and again.

I can tell you that there are those who have hurt me deeply and those hurts will never, ever be forgotten. I have struggled for decades with how I forgive someone who hurt me so brutally.

Intellectually, I know that once I forgive them, I will cut the chain that binds us together. They will cease to have any kind of power over me. I have heard this articulated by both Archbishop Tutu and Nadia Bolz-Weber. She says forgiveness releases you from the burden and sets you free. She further says freedom fighters are brave people who, among other things, are not afraid "to speak truth to stupid". (From "Have a little faith" video "Forgiving Assholes"). I adore that quote.

In forgiving someone, we are setting ourselves free. We are taking back our power; we are taking back our voice.

Something I have wrestled with for a very long time is this; how do I forgive someone who has never apologised and is now dead?

I once worked with a counsellor who told me that I was choosing to not forgive the person who hurt me because it kept us connected. I was FURIOUS. How could I forgive someone who was dead?

How could I forgive someone who had not asked for forgiveness? It seemed ludicrous to me! Needless to say, our counselling relationship did not last long. We were not a good fit for each other.

Let's take a step back. We have heard from God, from Brené Brown, from Desmond Tutu and from Nadia Bolz-Weber. They have told us some really important things:

Forgiveness is not about a pollyanna-like, sweeping under the carpet, waving of the hand saying "oh, that's okay". Not even a little bit.

Forgiveness is about doing the hard work of loving enough to forgive. This is especially relevant in forgiving ourselves. Many adults who were abused as children blame themselves for the abuse. Completely illogical yet very common. It's as though the adult is angry that they were unable to save the child who was abused, forgetting that THEY were that child. Thus, they must forgive themselves. For they did nothing wrong and could not have done anything to prevent the abuse.

Forgiveness takes time. In some cases, it can take a lifetime. And the person who controls that time is you. Just because someone apologises does NOT mean you have to instantly forgive them.

For a proper apology there needs to be three things: an admission of causing harm, remorse for causing that harm and a desire to make amends.

This is why the truth and reconciliation commission in both South Africa and Canada took so many years. To face someone who has hurt you takes tremendous courage. To apologise to someone you hurt also takes tremendous courage; as does the desire to make amends. It is a process, which, to be effective cannot be rushed.

Perhaps THIS is what Brené Brown, Desmond Tutu, Nadia Bolz-Weber and Jesus are talking about. It's difficult, dirty, messy, necessary work that takes as long as it needs to.

Perhaps God knows, that if we refuse to forgive those who have harmed us, we are continuing to give them real estate in our minds that they don't deserve.

Perhaps God wants us to be freedom fighters and speak truth to stupid. To stand up, use our voices and love ourselves enough to leave the abuse and the abuser behind.

God absolutely knows that we are worth that time and work. Now, do we know our worth? Are we ready to be set free?

Amen.

Matthew 18.21-35
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