

Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

September 11, 2011

We will never forget. A phrase uttered a thousand times over in the days after September 11, 2001. We won't forget those who died or those who were left behind to grieve. We won't forget the ordinary heroes and the tremendous acts of sacrifice. And yet, as I've watched commemorative clips this week, I've realized how much I have forgotten about the panic, the shock and the sadness of the day or the sudden exile from our familiar life. Perhaps there is something good to affirm in that; that despite horrendous tragedy, life does continue by the grace of God. Yet we will never forget remains our intention; a steadfast stance in the face of inhumanity and a love-filled grief for those who lost their earthly lives.

And then today we are given a text about forgiveness. The kingdom of heaven is like a king who is astronomically merciful upon a servant who owes him an impossible debt. The kingdom of heaven responds strongly, even harshly, to a servant who will not extend the same mercy to a fellow debtor. Of all days to get a scripture about forgiveness. It is an uncomfortable topic most days, but a topic that today might make us rigid in our seats.

Perhaps our rigidity stems from the typical way we bounce around the notion of forgiveness as 'forgive and forget.'¹ Just forgive and forget, we say, casting forgiveness as the impossible task of pretending something didn't happen. And yet we know this is not possible. The sins we commit against one another cause real damage. The hurts we inflict leave wounds, ones sometimes still visible years later. Forgive and forget also makes a mockery of the deep, vicious wounds human beings inflict upon one another as nation against nation, tribe against tribe. "O earth, cover not their blood" reads one inscription at Auschwitz. There are some things that should never, ever be forgotten.²

Another way to speak of forgiveness is as the suspension of judgment or the cancellation of a debt.³ You did me a great wrong but I will excuse you from the consequences. "I am a sinner but God graciously treats me as if I weren't." Rowan Williams calls this a step up from the 'forgive and forget' approach. And at first glance, it appears in keeping with the message of our morning scripture. A servant owes a debt that will be impossible to repay. Ten thousand talents is the combination of two of the greatest quantities in Greek measurements. If calculated out to a precise figure, it equals 150,000 years' worth of wages. And yet, one heartfelt, on-the-knees plea and the payment is excused. But like the servant who quickly goes out and grabs the neck of his fellow debtor, "this is a forgiveness that changes nothing." This kind of forgiveness becomes an endless cycle of sin and excuse, sin and excuse that may reflect our world but isn't the kingdom of heaven.

¹ Almost all of what I say about forgiveness in this sermon stems from Rowan Williams' amazing sermon on forgiveness entitled "The Forgiveness of Sins" and found in *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1995), 49-53. Direct quotes are in quotations.

² Williams, 50.

³ Williams, 50.

Real forgiveness, suggests Williams, changes things. It releases hope. It strengthens love. True forgiveness, he continues, happens not when we say let's not mention it again or what you did doesn't really matter but when we say, 'you hurt me deeply, irrevocably but I still care about you. There is enough love here to meet the pain.' This is uncomfortable, tough forgiveness that begins with truth-telling. It is forgiveness in which our accountability to one another deepens. Genuinely forgiven we know that we matter to someone, we know something of the love that exists between us and another and we are gladly more responsible to that person in the future.

For most of us there comes a moment, and maybe today's anniversary is one of those times, when we look at a situation and say, 'I can't forgive.' A time when we recognize the limit to our love. But, asks Williams, is forgiveness dependent upon human faltering, sputtering attempts to love? The Gospel, he suggests, says no. "Forgiveness starts and ends with God. God forgives and has the right to forgive because God bleeds for every human wound. In as much as we do good or ill to any human person, it is done to God." What we know by the cross of Jesus is that in the face of the violence we do to love there is an inexhaustible mercy, a flowing foundation of reliable, resilient, unending love. And we can be sure that amid "the drying up of human capacity to love, the killing of love by pain, there still is, at the heart of everything, a love that cannot be killed by pain."

The parable appears to be about the cancellation of a debt. What it is really about is the offering of mercy, the well-spring of love always available to us. And it is about the danger we put ourselves in when we take the forgiveness but are not changed, when we take the mercy but lose interest in the tough task of offering mercy to someone who has harmed us.

All of this talk about forgiveness should make us approach the forgiveness of a murderer, a dictator, a child molester or a hijacker with nothing but enormous seriousness, with the same need for truth-telling and with the same reverence for the love that cannot be killed by pain that comes from God. We can't pretend to know exactly what happens in these situations. We can't see the reaches of both God's love and God's judgment. We can know that we are safe, we are held and that the God who is in charge is ultimately good and just. Knowing this, we turn our attention to the forgiveness that is at work in us. There is no end to what God's love can do in us and by extension there is no end to what God's love can do in the world. "We must see forgiveness as something creative of the future, the future of our own love. It is never a possession, it is not something finished; it is a gift and a hope, and also a call."

This past week I was listening to NPR and heard in some of their 9/11 coverage a small debate about the fact that there will be no clergy speakers at the events scheduled today at Ground Zero. The decision was made, in part, out of sensitivity to diverse faiths, in part, because of time constraints and perhaps also because of the increasing secularization of our world. But the absence of a voice of faith has stuck with me, making me wonder if it is a challenge to us who follow Jesus to speak something unmistakably Christian amid all that has been said surrounding this tragic day; to live out the forgiveness that lives at the heart of God, to witness to the God who can do impossible things and the God who says 'in life and in death, every one of you belong to me.'

Only very rarely does that kind of mature forgiveness - the forgiveness that changes things – happen in isolation. We only get there together, living out in community what it means to be the body of Christ. That fact makes it providential that today is also Christian Formation Sunday, when we renew our commitment to deepen our faith lives through intentional times of studying together. Peter’s question to Jesus about forgiveness occurred within a larger dialogue Jesus had with all of his disciples, as they figured out together what it would look like to walk to the cross. We need each other in order to practice transformative forgiveness. We need to learn together, debate with one another and encourage each other. We need to know each other well enough to ask someone to pray for us and to be willing to have another hold us accountable to the vows of faith we have made. Only then will we see in fullness the unlikely yet inexplicitly healing life God is creating among and through us, for all the world.