

THE NECESSITY OF FORGIVENESS

Psalm 103; Matthew 18: 21-33

It's something we all need to do. But sometimes, it's the hardest thing in the world to do. What am I talking about? Forgiveness. Whether it's the little things of life, the petty things, or whether it's more substantial hurts and offences that do it for us, forgiveness is a challenge.

But what's the alternative? We can hold on to the hurt and offence really tightly until it becomes a hard mass taking up space in our minds, hearts and bodies. We can imagine ways to retaliate or lash out or make someone pay. We can build a wall around us, a wall of anger and blame. We can carry guilt, shame and self-pity, and this blocks a more constructive response to what's been done that could have been done differently. But whether it's forgiving another person, forgiving oneself, forgiving God, forgiving life the way it's happened, forgiveness can be the hardest thing in the world.

Here's the thing, though. Do we want to live, really live abundantly? Do we want to find that door to a richer life of purpose and peace? Do we want to experience healing and renewal and even resurrection if we have fallen into a pit we can't seem to get out of? If we do, then we need to have a constructive way through forgiveness in our lives. Whoever we are and however long we've been alive, we will all need forgiveness at some point in our lives. And whoever we are, we will all have those times in life when the act of forgiving will make all the difference to the fulfillment in our lives.

Forgiveness is not about letting someone off the hook. If we care about people and if we care about justice, we need to deal with the wrongs, hurts and injustices. Forgiveness is not about letting someone off the hook. Forgiveness is about dealing with the wrongs, hurts and injustices in a very different way.

What do I mean? Let's begin with our scripture readings. Jesus tells one of his many stories called parables. Parables teach a spiritual life lesson using common everyday illustrations. But the parables Jesus tells, also use outrageous twists that can catch listeners off guard. The reason Jesus tells this parable in particular is in response to

Peter's question: 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Seven is a lot of forgiving. But you can still count to seven. You can still keep track of the forgiving when its seven times. Jesus responds in a way Peter could never have expected. He says: 'Not seven times, Peter. I tell you, seventy-seven times.' In other words, forgive until you lose count of the times. Your relationship with the offender can't be about how many times you've forgiven him or her. It has to go a lot deeper than that to be forgiveness.

What does this mean? Jesus tells a parable to explain.

In the parable, there are three characters. There's a king. There's a slave. And there's another slave. In order to appreciate the story for what it's saying, we need to understand how ridiculously outrageous it is for people hearing it. We're told that a certain king has slaves as any king would have in the ancient world. The slaves owe money and the more debts they have, the more they are enslaved to the king. At a certain point, the king, like any banker would do today, thinks the debts are a little too outstanding and the possibility of default on the loans is high. So, he calls in the loans. One slave happens to owe ten thousand talents. Ten thousand talents is an astronomical sum, like billions of dollars today. How did this slave wrack up that kind of debt and how did the king not track this earlier? Who knows. But clearly there is no way the slave can ever repay this sum of money even if he had ten lifetimes to do it. Well, what are the king's options? The slave's life is not worth much. But selling him off along with his whole family can bring in a little something to compensate for the huge loss on the loan. This sounds really cruel for us here today. But these were the rules then.

But this king is no typical king. When the slave falls on his knees pleading with the king, promising to pay back a debt he can never pay back, how does the king respond? Does he start laughing? Does he start abusing the slave verbally for his pathetic begging? No. We're told this: 'out of pity for the slave, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.' The word translated as 'pity' here is far more dramatic in the original Greek. '*esplachnisthe*' is about the kind of compassion that overwhelms you like a punch in the chest would leave you gasping for breath. We're supposed to believe that the king is so impacted by his slave's pathetic pleading, that he just erases the debt. Isn't that unbelievable?

But then, the story gets more outrageous still. For this slave, just forgiven an astronomical sum, finds a fellow slave who owes him one hundred denarii. One hundred denari is a paltry sum, maybe \$50. Do you not think he would forgive this debt and so many other debts besides given the kind of overwhelmingly compassionate and generous forgiveness he has just experienced? No. He grabs his fellow slave by the throat and threatens him with prison if he doesn't pay, and pay immediately.

Isn't this unbelievable? It is, all of it. The kind of outrageous, forgiving compassion shown by the king is nuts. A king doesn't make it as king by being so merciful. If you start forgiving debts so generously and liberally, who will pay you back? People need to be afraid of you and there have to be harsh consequences, otherwise the whole system collapses. And what about the slave toward his fellow slave. Such outrageous cruelty is nuts too. If people are that cruel, how can any system of credit in society work? There has to be some mercy some of the time, no?

But Jesus uses outrage to get people's attention. And once he gets their attention, he turns it around on them. How does this story get turned around on them and on us who are listening in?

There are three key words Jesus uses in this story, and these words are all feeling words, words that can really hit us deep down in our heart and soul if we let them. The first word is mercy. The king tells the slave: 'Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave as I had mercy on you?' The word for mercy in the original is '*eleos*.' *Eleos* is like warm honey slowly working its way down your throat when swallowing feels like pins and needles. Judgement, condemnation and blame are like pins and needles. Mercy is like warm honey soothing and comforting the jaggedness within. You can swallow. You can breathe. You can taste the peace. Mercy...

The second word is '*esplachnisthe*' translated as pity. But *esplachnisthe* is a physical word. It's like the kind of intense compassion that brings-you-down-to-your knees when you're really struck by another person's trouble and suffering. You have to really feel for someone else to have that kind of guttural response to their pain. This is how the king reacts toward his slave's desperate pleading.

And finally, there is the word for forgiveness itself. Forgiveness is a translation of '*afiken*.' *Afiken*, means to just let it go. Instead of holding it in intensely and living your life

holding your breath, you just let it go, breathe out and breath in again as you start a new chapter on your life journey. To let go is to get free of the sting of the hurt and the offence. To let go is to begin to get free to engage the person and the situation in a different way.

The journey of forgiveness has to include the experience of mercy. To show mercy you have to experience it. Forgiveness has to include a body/heart/spirit feeling of compassion. You have to be able to behold the vulnerable humanity in the other person in order to engage them differently for all the pain and hurt they may have caused. Finally, forgiveness has to include a letting go and letting be, over and over again. It is a journey, sometimes moment to moment, with setbacks in the midst of progress. It is a journey.

So, what does this look like in real life? Here's a true story.

In 2012, Adam Lanza, a disturbed young man, shot his mother to death. He then went to Sandy Hook elementary school on a shooting rampage. 20 children and 6 adults were killed. He then killed himself. One of the children killed was Emilie Parker. Emily was 6 years old. It is no surprise that Emily's parents were totally devastated. Anger and rage, self-blame, helplessness and hopelessness all swirled in them for a long time. But now, five years later, Emilie's mother, Alissa, has written a book, chronicling her personal journey. The book is called, "*An Unseen Angel.*"

Alissa calls her journey a journey of forgiveness. She says she wrote the book for Emilie's sisters who were just 3 and 4 when Emilie died. She also wanted the world to know that their story did not end on the worst days of their lives. She wanted to let the world know that, in her words: 'there were a "thousand acts of kindness and there was a miracle of healing in our hearts.'" At first, Alissa was understandably overwhelmed by her grief. She blamed herself for not being able to protect Emilie. Her grief so overwhelmed her that she couldn't bring herself to play with her other two girls, feeling guilt and too much memory of Emilie when she tried. Her deepest longing was to find a way to connect with Emilie again, for Emilie to appear in her dreams, to feel Emilie close in her heart.

This very passion is what propelled Alissa on her journey of forgiveness. She writes about the importance of mercy, compassion and letting go, all of which are essential elements to her journey. To feel mercy in her heart she had to find a way to forgive

herself and forgive God as she imagined God at the time. She found her way to mercy by coming to experience God more like a loving partner than some punishing and heartless judge.

Once mercy was moving in her like warm honey reaching deep down into the dark and jagged crevices of her heart, she took a major step toward compassion. She sought out the shooter's father. She found a man totally broken down by guilt, grief and shame. He had been separated from the shooter's mother and hadn't seen his son in years. His son had also been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and had major learning disabilities. All this manifested in disturbing behaviours. Even with all the medication and support, it was difficult to stabilize him, and it destroyed his parent's marriage.

What Alissa witnessed was a broken man alone in the world and despised by many who carried hate in their heart. Alissa, on the other hand felt she was surrounded by love, care and friendship. She began to feel compassion, compassion for this man and even the shooter himself, his dead mother, and all those parents and families struggling with mental illness and loss with their children.

Finally, Alissa had to come to a place of letting go, letting go the guilt, the anger, the hate, the need to strike back somehow and the energy it gave her to imagine ways to do that. She had to let it go again and again. This continues to be her journey day by day and sometimes moment to moment. Letting go is a necessary step in order to be free and in order to open up space for other, more life-giving currents like joy, currents like new purpose in supporting and blessing others who carry hurt, pain and hate in their hearts. Even though there continue to be dark times of feeling the emptiness without Emilie, in small moments and in bigger ones, when mercy, compassion and forgiveness fill her heart, Alissa feels Emilie close to her. In her words: "I miss her. I love her... I am at peace."

Mercy... Compassion... Letting go... What impact do such words have in your life? How does Jesus' call to forgiveness need to move through your heart, your relationships and your life?... Let us pray: Mercy... Compassion... letting go... Forgiveness... find us where we are, O God... feed us... resurrect us... Amen.