

FORGIVENESS: THE EXPERIENCE AND THE PRACTICE

Mark 14: 66-72; 1 Timothy 1: 12-17

Why forgive? Denise and Mark had been together for years. But Mark had betrayed her. She knew he had had a tough upbringing as a child. She knew he had some addiction issues. But having an affair even if it was short lived was the last straw. She could not and would not forgive.

And Mark? He didn't make it easy either. Mark was the king of denial. It was never his fault. It was his parent's fault, his employer's fault, his addiction's fault. He was only human after all. And the affair? It meant nothing, it was one night, he was so drunk he didn't even remember a thing. I mean, hadn't Denise made her own mistakes, even with her superior upbringing and fewer reasons to fail and fall?

Why is it so hard to seek out forgiveness? And why is it so hard to forgive? Obviously we know the serious stuff, the hurtful stuff, the stuff you can't take back and pretend never happened. The world is full of wrongs piled upon wrongs. People have been hurt and people have lost, and people have been harmed in ways they can never fully recover from. But how do we move forward? Is there any hope in a world such as ours for genuine healing, for reconciliation where possible, and peace when we have to go our separate ways in the end?

Whether it's individuals or whether it's communities and nations, forgiveness is done well and not so well. For example, people often compare Germany after the Holocaust to Japan after the 2nd world war, to the US after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to Turkey after the Armenian Genocide. From all out confession, remorse, and creative efforts to seek out and live out forgiveness and reparation as in Germany, to total denial that anything wrong or unjust was committed against Armenians in Turkey, responses to wrong and injustice are all over the place. Even as we Canadians have begun a journey in search of the healing of forgiveness and hoped for reconciliation with people indigenous to this land, how we live out the consequences of forgiveness is far from worked out.

Sadly, far too many of our public examples of apologies in search of forgiveness are from politicians and people with large social profiles in sports, business, and public institutions. What's the first thing they most often do? Denial. And if they can't deny what's happened it's blame of everything and everyone but themselves. And when the blame can't be pushed off them they make some grand apology. Whether the apology has any sincerity to it or not, we distrust its authenticity because we know it comes with a lot of self-interest too. It's about surviving in power or minimizing the consequences to one's reputation and finances.

But is this as good as it can get? Are there ways to really communicate our regret and sorrow so that the other whom we have hurt hears and absorbs it and we ourselves internalize it in a way where positive change happens in our lives and our relations? Can healing really happen and can reconciliation truly become something genuine?

Let's dive into our scripture readings in search of revelatory guidance.

The founding story of the scriptures is the exodus of the Hebrews out of slavery. In their gratitude for newfound freedom, they enter a covenant with God. They commit to the highest standards of justice and love toward God and each other. They are to become a light to the nations. But they fail to live up to the standards. They are human after all. The possibilities are great but so are the vulnerabilities. We can really grow strong in our values, but we can also get triggered so deeply that our values go out the window as we react and make terrible choices causing great hurt and harm.

And so, the rest of the story is about God finding a way to forgive, to heal and to become reconciled to a people who will always be somewhere in-between - rising up to the challenge of faithfulness to the highest standards of justice and love, and failing them, often miserably. Forgiveness is an essential form of love when relationships fail and there is hurt and harm. Without forgiveness, there is no future, and nobody wins.

And so, this makes perfect sense of the gospel narrative of Jesus, doesn't it? Jesus suffers such great injustice that the forgiveness in him has to be that much greater. The greater the sin, the greater the forgiveness needed. But who is it that Jesus must forgive? The irony of the gospel narrative is that those who are most loyal followers of Jesus, those who end up being the most courageous followers of Jesus, and those who experience the greatest personal transformation in their union with Jesus, are those who have experienced the greatest kind of forgiveness from Jesus. OK, so how does that work? And how does that apply to us, especially those of us who don't feel we have committed the kinds of sin that require that much forgiveness?

In the gospel Jesus tells the leaders of his people that he has come not for those who are well but for those who are sick and in need of a physician. Are you sick and in need of healing? Are you broken in some way and in need of greater wholeness? It's not about being negative or down on yourself. It's about wanting more and better for yourself and in what you can be and do for others too. We can be a greater blessing in the world, and we can live greater abundance and peace in ourselves. The journey of healing through forgiveness is about all that. So, how does it work?

I'd like to talk about three people who figure prominently in our gospel story and the New Testament. There is Peter and Paul, and there is Judas. All three betray Jesus and they betray him badly. Sure, they can blame it on the stress and pressure of life, their disappointment in

Jesus and a failure of expectations from him. They can blame it on ignorance, bad influences, and desperate circumstances. There is fear and anger too, big time. But whatever the reasoning, at the end of the day they must face the consequences of what they've done. Can they face them? Will they face them? How will they get past the guilt and the shame? How will they make peace with the way things are rather than what they want them to be? How will they accept their weaknesses but also open themselves to new possibilities if given a chance? Will faith and hope in possible reconciliation rise up? Will they find peace in what can never be reversed or taken back? Can the wrongs committed be converted through forgiveness toward greater justice and compassion?

Let's start with Judas. The story of Judas is well known throughout the gospels. What is a mystery is Judas' motivations in betraying Jesus. Was he disappointed in Jesus? By betraying Jesus was he hoping to trigger Jesus to act in a certain way? Was it all for self-interest in some way? We can only speculate. But what we do know is this: Judas has huge regret, guilt, and shame for what he has done. He wants to take it back but he cannot. So what does he do? He falls into a deep despair. Despair sees no way out. And so, like so many in our world too who fall into deep despair, Judas ends his life by taking his own life. Rather than seek to make amends somehow, rather than wait it out and work through his pain, his guilt, and his shame, he ends it. Very tragic and very sad. We wish it were otherwise. Judas like any human in despair deserves better.

OK, but then there's Peter and Paul. Both of them also betray Jesus and they do so openly and severely. There is great regret, guilt, and shame in them too. So how is it that they not only survive but even grow to become Spirit-inspired leaders and courageous exemplars of the Jesus movement?

Well, it starts with open and honest confession. And let's start with Peter. Tradition has it that the gospel of Mark, from which our scripture reading comes from, is dictated by an elderly Peter and written down by younger Mark. Whether this is true or not, it tells us something very important. The early Christian movement that revered Peter as the recognized leader of the Jesus movement saw in Peter a man who had needed to receive a huge amount of forgiveness and work through a lot of guilt and shame toward healing and reconciliation.

The gospel account openly tells Peter's story as he makes grand claims to Jesus that he will stick by him even to the death, but then runs away as soon as Jesus is arrested. To add to the shame of it all, Peter is even scared of a servant-girl's claims that he is one of Jesus' people. And just when Peter has fallen into his most shameful moment of denial, we're told Peter remembers Jesus' prediction of his betrayal. In his shame he breaks down weeping. Wow! How awful and how sad. And yet the gospel story continues as the risen Christ comes back to confront Peter. Peter breaks down weeping again because rather than pointing a finger at him

to shame him the risen Christ embraces him. Peter is not only welcomed back into the fold, but he is called again to become the leader of the movement.

So, what is this telling us about forgiveness and about Peter? Peter's strength is not in never making a mistake he regrets. No. Peter's strength is in his ability to face it, to recognize his vulnerability, to open his heart to forgiving compassion and to welcome any human no matter how far they've fallen. One who knows their desperate need for forgiveness will be that much more compassionate and forgiving of others. And mutual compassion and forgiveness grows the kind of love that is the super-power of the Jesus movement. Do you want some more of that power in yourself? Do you want the kind of love in you that can see others like yourself too: infinitely precious and beautiful despite their vulnerability and brokenness?

Well, and then there's Paul. In our scripture reading, we have in Paul's own voice his confession as "a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence". Elsewhere in his letters, Paul also says that because of the shame and regret he carried about what he had done, he worked that much more tirelessly as a servant of Christ and Christ's people. Not that Paul was somehow going to make up for what he had done. He could never take back the ways his actions traumatized and damaged people, families, and communities. There were some who could never forgive Paul. Many in the movement distrusted him. His old Pharisee friends despised him and wanted to see him dead, and some Christians would never acknowledge his apostleship at the level of Peter, James, and John.

And yet, what does Paul say in our scripture reading? "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord... for the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus... The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost. But for that reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example of those who would come to believe in him for eternal life." You see, for Paul, the Spirit-power of inner transformation rises when we merge spiritually into Christ and he in us. We are stripped of all our denial, our self-righteousness, and our cozy self-satisfaction and filled up with compassion and humble gratitude. Paul will approach any person as one who has been to the bottom and he will share that about himself. He is not ashamed to confess it, because confessing it and then demonstrating how much love is inside him is a living example of the transformation that can happen in a person when the Spirit of Christ enters them.

Wow! OK, so what does that have to tell us here today? Well, it's not about digging deep down to confess sins that are not a part of our lives. But it is about getting past any shame or embarrassment in us to confess that we are vulnerable and even broken in some ways in need of greater healing and wholeness. We do hurt people sometimes intended or not and we do resent if not hate at times the people who hurt us, put us down or dismiss us. We envy people who appear to us better and we have contempt for people who think they're better. We act in

all kinds of unfortunate ways when we are desperate, stressed or in crisis. That's part of life and our life. But how do we welcome the healing and transforming Spirit power of Christ into those broken, hurting, and vulnerable places within us? Where do we need deeper forgiveness in our lives?

After many terrible things were said and done, Denise and Mark found their way again. After some distance, some burnt bridges at work and with family and friends, Mark got some help and some therapy. I've met persons like Mark in church over the years. They have also come to realize that they need something spiritual to build up their lives, fill the emptiness and sustain them through the rough patches.

Denise also found her peace in time. She let go the bitterness and even came to feel some compassion for Mark. Even as she could never love him as a life-partner, she came to care for him as a human being. She encouraged him from afar as he worked to build up his life again, and she also came to rebuild her own life as she realized her need for forgiveness for things she could now face in herself with some space to do so. I've met Denises in the church over the years too.

What about you? Where are you at on the forgiveness, healing, and new life trajectory? Where has the Spirit of Jesus come into your life in times where your vulnerability, some brokenness and some inner need has met you or rose up in you? Like Peter and Paul and many others over the centuries, may you and I continue to open ourselves to the mercy, the grace, and the flourishing of spiritual life in Christ. And may you and I renew our call to become the hands, feet, voice, and heart of Christ for each other and in our world in the unique ways that make us who we are – forgiven and on a journey toward ever greater wholeness.

Amen.