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FORGIVING FROM THE HEART

Matthew 18: 21-35, Romans 12: 9-21

After church one day, she wanted to speak to me. She and her husband had been married a long time. There was loyalty in the relationship and there used to be love and affection. Now, it seemed to her, all that was left was duty. So what had changed and why had it changed? He had managed the household and took care of her when she had had a bout of cancer a few years ago. She had also had an affair once. He said he forgave her for that and that he loved her. But she always felt a certain sense of indebtedness to him. It's as if she owed him for sticking it out with her and caring for her. There were little ways he kept reminding her how much she owed him. He would expect things and demand things. He would put her down, be impatient and lose his temper. She felt trapped by her moral obligations to him. She felt ashamed of her inability to love him anymore. She felt guilty of her resentment toward him and what he seemed to hold over her. Would she ever experience freedom? Would she ever be able to forgive herself and forgive him too?

Forgiveness is a word we all know. But do we know what it means? I think most of us know what it means even if we don't always live it. Sometimes we don't want to live it. Sometimes we may feel that forgiving someone is capitulating and giving in in a way we shouldn't. Maybe forgiving is letting someone off the hook too easily. But maybe our difficulty forgiving is something that is preventing us from a deeper level of freedom, joy and peace. Have we ever thought about that? What about our greater freedom, joy and peace? And more, how about doing the right thing no matter what?

So then, we need to reflect on forgiveness and we need to reflect on our own journey of forgiveness. If we care about greater inner freedom, joy and peace, if we care about doing the right thing no matter what... If we care about any of that, then we have an opportunity in this time of worship to engage an important spiritual issue that can make all the difference for our inner quality of life.

And to guide us and inspire us, Jesus gives us this wild parable. I call it wild because even though it's fairly simple to understand, what it says and the way it's said is a little wild. What do I mean?

Let's set the context. Peter comes to Jesus and asks him about forgiveness. But he's not asking Jesus about forgiving people out there in the world, people who are strangers, people who commit horrible crimes. No. He asks Jesus about people who are close: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" - People close to us and people from whom we expect something more... A fellow sibling in spiritual community should be a good person, a person of integrity, responsibility, care and consideration. Someone close to us is someone with whom we share our vulnerabilities, someone whom we trust. Too often, the hurts we carry deepest and the resentment that burns the fiercest is in relationship to those close to us as family and friends who have wounded us somehow. Even if we want to forgive and even if we have forgiven in some way, the hurt, resentment, mistrust and fear can still live in us and come to the surface again and again.

So, Peter asks, "how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" That's a pretty generous number of times, no? And yet, here's where the parable begins to get wild. Jesus answers Peter in this way: Not seven times, Peter, but, "I tell you, seventy-seven times." Seven may be a generous number of times, but you can still keep track of seven times. Seventy-seven times is forgiving without limit. It's forgiving and forgetting the number of times.

Well Jesus, I for one have some problems with what you're saying to Peter. Forgiving is hard, even when I'm convinced it's the right thing to do. But forgiving without limit no matter what's been done or how the person has responded to what they've done?... that's another matter! Why should I forgive in all circumstances and without count?

Here's where Jesus tells a parable that's as wild as his response to Peter. Once again, context is important. Jesus speaks God's truth. God's truth is true in all times and places. Yet we can only access such truth in very specific situations, in ways of thinking and cultures in which we live and move and have our being. Jesus communicates God's eternal truth in the world he lives in at that time and place. And that world is a world where there are kings, queens and slaves. It is a world where everyone believes in hell as well as heaven after you die, and hell as a place of eternal torture. Jesus doesn't tell them that's all wrong. He does it in a different way. He talks to them about forgiveness without limit and forgiveness from the heart no matter what. If that's what God does, is there any place for hell, torture and slavery in God's eternal rule? Jesus doesn't spell it out for them, but he does teach them an impossible truth about forgiveness which contradicts a lot of what they believe and live in their world. What is this truth more specifically?

There is a king and he has slaves who owe him. One is brought to him and he owes the king a lot of money. 10,000 talents is equivalent to millions of dollars today. There's no way he could every pay that back. How did he get himself into such debt? How did he manage to get so much of the king's money? In that world, the king has every right to throw this slave into debtors prison along with his whole family. Even if they all die in prison after many years, they will still not have paid back the equivalent in money. Even though this is a harsh way of living, these are the rules in that world.

But here's another wild thing. The king feels pity for the slave. Imagine that! How many excuses would the king have heard in his lifetime? How does he remain king if he has a soft heart? And yet, he feels pity, genuine pity. So what does he do? Here's another wild thing: he forgives the slave the entire debt. All of it without remainder! Isn't this a bit extreme to say the least? What would other debtors think? Would the king's whole system of rules become questioned?

Well, when you feel pity and compassion for someone, you don't think about the consequences. You allow the love you feel to take over. The king makes a decision not out of self-interest but out of pity and compassion, we're told. Hard to believe but there you have it. I'm sure the people hearing this parable in Jesus' day would be scratching their heads just as much as we may be doing here and now. What kind of king acts this way?

But wait, there's more. The parable continues with a further twist. This same slave just forgiven an astronomical sum goes out to collect some of his own debts. He finds one fellow slave who owes him some money: 100 denari. This is like \$50. A paltry sum compared to the millions he owed the king. Should he not let it go and have a party instead to celebrate his good fortune? And yet, just like the king acts wild with pity where a king would never do that, this slave acts with brutal savagery toward a fellow slave! He grabs him by the throat and threatens him to pay immediately! Can you believe it?

Well, but the twists and turns of this parable continue even further. Fellow slaves are distressed and upset by the harshness of their brother slave. They report it to the king. The king is upset, hurt, furious. All he did for that slave and this is what he does?! From pity and compassion the king's heart turns vengeful in anger. He has this slave arrested and instead of just ending up in prison, he is taken in to be tortured until he pays off his debt....

And here's the final twist. Jesus knows that the language of imprisonment and torture is the language of vengeance and hell. Everyone hearing him knows it. But he says something totally inconsistent about it: 'So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, **if you do not forgive your fellow human being from your heart.**' OK, let's ponder this for a moment. Jesus is making a kind of threat on behalf of God. God will have you sent to hell which is eternal torture if you don't forgive your fellow human again and again, and forgive them from your heart. Well, doesn't that mean we're all doomed?! Who can do that? Maybe this slave was particularly bad with his fellow slave, but Jesus was responding to Peter's question about forgiving a sibling, someone close who has hurt us deeply. Who can forgive every time from the heart, again and again, even if we want to?

Well, let's ponder Jesus' message more deeply. If the king is like God, the first move of God toward us is pity and compassion, infinitely so, without conditions, abundant and free.... The first move is God's compassion to us, but compassion if and when we are pleading for forgiveness ourselves. Unless we recognize our need for forgiveness, there is no starting point for receiving and experiencing infinite compassion. That's step one. And only when we internalize step one in our hearts, from God to us, which the slave clearly had not done, only then, do we also internalize step two: having that kind of energy of compassion and forgiveness for our fellow humans. We can only forgive if we have experienced forgiveness ourselves. If God is love with us every day, such love cannot but impose itself on how we relate to those around us, especially those who hurt us.

All the energy for hate, vengeance, punishment and torture comes from hurt, anger, resentment and bitterness which we carry in us whether we are aware of it or not. The only way to forgive from the heart is to experience our need for it and our experience of it so that it fills us up inside and changes the way we feel, the way we accept life, the way we open to others, the way we are patient and understanding with ourselves and through circumstances we can't make as we want. Forgiveness is not just an act but an energy. It begins with God, from God to us, through us to the world around us. The belief in hell and torture are for those who have not experienced this kind of forgiveness... To believe in hell is to remain a prisoner and a slave.

If our God is a God who throws people into hell, this reveals the state of our heart more than it reveals anything about God. It reveals that we are prisoners.

Yes, some people will never acknowledge what they have done to us. Yes, some people will always press our buttons and trigger us in all kinds of ways. Yes, some people will never deserve forgiveness. Yes, some people may take advantage of our openness of heart and willingness to forgive. But who wins in the struggle to forgive from the heart? We do. Maybe we will be taken advantage of sometimes. That's a risk we take. And maybe we won't be as trusting, and maybe we will be more cautious, and maybe we will learn how to discern better with people. But may our hearts continue to experience the rich energy of God's powerful, forgiving love flowing into us, kindling us, making us spiritually alive, and flowing through us into the world around us. God knows our world needs that kind of love, more than ever.

The woman at the beginning of our story had to make some decisions. Whether she decided to stay or leave her marriage, she would still have to struggle to forgive her husband and herself in order to be free. And whether she decided to stay or leave, experiencing the infinite, forgiving love of God would make all the difference in the world to how she would walk the rest of her life journey.

What about you and me? What journey of forgiveness do we need to make? Is it with other people? Is it with how life has turned out for us? Is it with limitations that we have trouble accepting? Is it with a world full of pandemic reality and racial injustice? How we open our heart to forgiveness will make all the difference in the quality of justice we will fight for and stand by in this world.

Let us pray.... Help us, O God... Help me, to open my heart even further... To open my heart to my infinite need to be forgiven... my infinite need to forgive... Amen.