

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 19, Year A
September 17, 2017
Matthew 18:21-35

Let us pray. Come Holy Spirit and kindle in our hearts the fire of your love. Amen.

I don't really like to think about forgiveness – it makes me uncomfortable. To forgive another requires both vulnerability and denial of self. Most of the time, I think I would much rather stew in resentment and look for opportunities to even the score.

Forgiveness is such uncomfortable territory because it requires intimacy. In order to forgive we must open our eyes and hearts to the offender. See them not as an abstraction – as one who says and does hurtful or selfish things – but see that person for who they are: a beloved child of God, who carries God's image within. But also someone who is prone to sinfulness and greatness – acts of love and compassion, as well as pettiness and violence. Someone who is in the process of holy transformation and who is always in need of redemption and reconciliation.

And while offering forgiveness can make me a bit uncomfortable, I am especially disconcerted when asking for or receiving it. That requires me to open my eyes to my own sinfulness and imperfection. It challenges me to set aside my own personal striving for perfection and to realize that I make mistakes - both small and terrible - that I hurt others; that I am selfish, self-centered, and self-seeking at times (oftentimes more frequently than I would like to admit). I don't like to have the light shining in all of these dark corners of my soul, where the dust-bunnies of neglect and willful denial collect. I would much rather contain the light in the center of the room – at times keeping it under the bushel basket for good measure. All the better to avoid the truth of who I am - a beloved child of God who is still on the way of transformation and who is always in need of redemption and reconciliation.

I have experienced the wonderful and terrible grace of unexpected and unmerited forgiveness. One time in particular will always stay with me. It was the first day of a graduate school class. We were seated seminar-style with the tables in a square and I was sitting next to the professor. We had just come back from a break, he was working on his laptop and had placed his cup of coffee on the table between his arms as he was typing. Noticing this, I thought that I would be helpful and move it out of the way. While I was reaching over to pick up the cup, he moved his arm and I knocked the cup over and dumped the entire eight ounces of freshly-brewed coffee into his computer.

Stunned and mortified, I immediately grabbed the machine and held it up, allowing the coffee to pour out all over my lap. I flipped the machine over and pulled out the battery in a last-ditch attempt to salvage something. Everyone sat stunned, staring, and all my efforts to remedy the situation failed. The computer was completely and totally ruined, and there was nothing that I could do.

After sitting with my overwhelming shame for the rest of the class, I said to the professor that I was so sorry – so unbelievably sorry – and that I would write him a check as soon as I got home if he would just give me his mailing address. I was desperate to make things right. But instead of accepting my offer, he said no, he would not accept my money and that this was just an accident. There was nothing I could do to make things better. He offered **forgiveness** when I asked for the option of repayment. I wanted to fix the situation and instead he forgave me, and

the only way I could free myself from my own shame was to face it, and to accept and receive his forgiveness.

True forgiveness is both liberating as well as demanding, because it requires something of the forgiven – something challenging. It requires that the offender humble and make herself vulnerable enough to receive the sometimes-unwanted gift of forgiveness. Our gospel reading today is about all about forgiveness, both forgiveness given and forgiveness received. To live within the Christian community, Jesus teaches that we are expected to forgive continually – not seven times, but seventy-seven. In the Jewish context, seven is a holy number, so when Peter asks if they should forgive someone seven times, he is not placing a limit on forgiveness. Rather, he is asking something more like “must I practice perfect forgiveness?”

In Jesus’ response of “seventy-seven times”, he instructs that not only are we to practice perfect forgiveness, but that our forgiveness should be beyond perfect; beyond counting. He teaches that offering the gift of forgiveness is not about being nice, polite, or even generous, rather it is about being holy. Forgiveness is not about being nice, it is about being holy.

The parable that Jesus uses to illustrate this lesson opens up and broadens his instruction on extending perfect forgiveness to include the other side of the forgiveness coin. In this story, Jesus calls us not only to forgive others continually, but that the practice of perfect forgiveness also requires that we receive forgiveness fully and in such a way as to affect a change of heart. In accepting true forgiveness, we allow grace to transform us – to change our hearts. In receiving and accepting holy forgiveness, we invite God’s grace to initiate and further the process of transforming our raw and unformed passions into love. And this developing and redeeming love, in the face of sin, pain, and violence, is then expressed as forgiveness extended to others. Rather than responding violence to violence, or pain to pain, holy forgiveness is the response that catalyzes change and transformation of the heart.

Jesus' rules on forgiveness are quite different that those of our contemporary culture. I have observed how our gifts of forgiveness and gratitude – whether given or received – have been diluted of meaning, and therefore of its transformative power. This is even true for simple expressions of gratitude. Think about the last time you thanked someone today. What did they say in response? Most likely, they responded with, "No worries" or "No problem". The problem here is that in their choice of words, they inadvertently deny the grace of gratitude. They don't mean to – they mean to communicate, "You're welcome" – but the words spoken effectively are a rejection of this grace nonetheless. And, as we know from Jesus' lesson that it is not what goes into the body that defiles but what comes out that defiles, words and thoughts matter. Quite unintentionally, these people, in responding "No worries" to a "Thank you", effectively deny this extended grace.

Likewise, it is all too common that our offered gift of forgiveness is also unintentionally denied. What happens when you apologize to someone? The response is frequently, "It's ok" or "It's no problem" or "No big deal". When this is the response, the opportunity of forgiveness is short-circuited. They end up deflecting the apology rather than receiving it by saying, “Thank you. I accept your apology.” Again, the intentions are good – they want to downplay the situation and apology because they want to make it easier for us. They feel uncomfortable and don't want us feel bad. The downside to this response is that they effectively reject our repentance and apology, and therefore deny us the exchange of holy forgiveness that affects transformation in both of us.

In a similar way, the grace of forgiveness that the king in Jesus' parable extends to the slave is denied and defiled by the slave's subsequent actions. The slave outwardly accepts but

inwardly denies the gift of transformational grace offered in the king's audacious act of forgiveness for an enormous debt. And this is made evident when the slave refuses to extend this holy forgiveness to a fellow slave who owes him even a comparatively miniscule debt.

Jesus calls us not only to forgiveness but to the practice of perfect, or holy, forgiveness. Forgiveness is not about being nice – it is about being holy. To be holy, our acts of forgiveness of others should be in response to the forgiveness that had been extended to us – first by God and also by each other. To be holy, we are to forgive as we have been forgiven.

And the inverse is also true. To be holy, our reception of transformative forgiveness demands that we respond in kind. To be holy, we must allow the forgiveness that has been given to us transform our hearts – and it is out of that transformation that we are then able to extend holy forgiveness to others.

Amen.