

Proper 19A
September 13, 2020
S. Stephen's, Providence

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to begin by thanking Fr. Pearson

for being our celebrant this morning,

when it became clear that I would be unable to do so

after spraining my ankle terribly on Thursday.

So I stand here before you this morning supported by a crutch,

grateful for your concern, but in no need of any sympathy, I assure you.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record,

I will talk this morning, as I did last week, about forgiveness.

I don't really do "sermon series" – but the lectionary would have us dwell

one more week in this theme of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Our Gospel reading picks up where we left off last week,

and this week, all of our readings carry this theme.

In Genesis,

we read of Joseph and his brothers weeping as they forgive each other:

Joseph had been thrown into a well and sold into slavery, remember –

and gone through terrible hardships

before rising to a place of power in the court of Pharaoh.

Joseph has every right to be unforgiving – to be furious:

instead, as they beg his forgiveness, Joseph begins to weep,

and they in turn begin to cry.

As they express fear of his anger, Joseph says, “Am I in the place of God?”

Joseph sees their remorse,

recognizes their mutual human condition in all its frailty,

and assures them of his forgiveness and compassion.

The Psalmist declares that the Lord forgives all our sins,

and is full of compassion and mercy.

St. Paul, echoing Joseph in a way,

reminds the Romans not to pass judgment on their fellow Christians

before remembering their own faults and own weaknesses,

as we all stand accountable and equal before God, the ultimate judge.

If the story of Joseph and his brothers sounds distant,
or part of a Biblical narrative removed from our own time,
let me tell you a story from not so long ago: that of Corrie ten Boom,
a Dutch woman arrested by the Nazis along with the rest of her family
for hiding Jews in their Haarlem home during the Holocaust.

She was imprisoned and eventually sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp along with her beloved sister, Betsie, who perished there just days before Corrie's own release on December 31, 1944. Inspired by Betsie's example of selfless love and forgiveness amid extreme cruelty and persecution, Corrie established a post-war home for other camp survivors trying to recover from the horrors they had escaped. She went on to travel widely as a missionary, preaching God's forgiveness and the need for reconciliation. Corrie's devout moral principles were tested when, by chance, she came face to face with one of her former tormentors in 1947. She had just finished one of her sermons at a church in Munich when she saw him – a balding heavy-set man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands.

As he made his way through the crowd towards her, in place of his overcoat and brown hat she saw instead a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It all came rushing back to her: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes

in the center of the floor, and the shame of walking naked past this man. Corrie remembered her sister's frail, emaciated frame walking ahead of her.

The man told Corrie that he had been a guard at Ravensbruck, but even though Corrie remembered him, as he continued to talk to her she realized he did not remember her at all.

The guard explained how he had become a Christian after the war ended. He knew that God had forgiven him for all the cruel things he did, but he wanted to hear it from her lips as well.

Fraulein ... his hand came out, "will you forgive me?"

Corrie ten Boom wrote of this moment,

"...I stood there — I whose sins had every day to be forgiven — and could not. My sister Betsie had died in that place — could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do."

But she knew she had to do it — she knew that God's forgiveness requires us to forgive those who have injured us as well.

She heard Jesus say, "If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." ...

As she stood there gripped with coldness in her heart, she realized that forgiveness was not an emotion, but an act of will.

"Jesus, help me!" she prayed silently.

"I can lift my hand, I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, she thrust her hand into the outstretched one before her. And as she did, an incredible thing took place.

"The current started in my shoulder," she wrote, "raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!"

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then."¹

Corrie's recollection of Jesus's words elsewhere in Matthew, about the danger of not forgiving others as we have been forgiven, echo Jesus's warning in our Gospel lesson this morning.

If you recall, our reading began with Peter, perhaps a bit facetiously, asking Jesus just how many times he should forgive someone for hurting him:

"As many as seven times?" he asks, incredulously.

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It is as if Peter is saying, “What, Lord?”

I can just take a pill for seven days and it will go away?”

Is saying “I forgive you?” like taking a pill?

Say it enough times and it will work?

As we know from Corrie ten Boom’s account,

no – it is not just a matter of saying it and not meaning it.

It is an act of will that allows us

to see another human being in all their brokenness,

as we consider our own.

As Paul reminds us, we all stand equally accountable before God.

So imagine Peter’s surprise when Jesus responds to his glib question

with dramatic hyperbole: No! Peter, not seven –

but seventy-seven times, if need be.

Jesus then tells a story about a servant who is forgiven an absurd debt –

something akin to the economy of a small nation state.

Instead of reflecting the incredible and lavish mercy and compassion

that he has experienced at the hand of his master, however,

the servant instead chooses to be unflinching in collecting a debt from another servant, which is trivial in its amount when compared with the debt he was forgiven.

The end of Jesus's story ends with a dire warning, in which the angry Lord hands over the unforgiving servant to be tortured.

Is this our loving God? Is this what he has in mind for us?

Well, like all of these instances, Jesus is using extreme language to get our attention, and drive on home his point:

which is to never forget to show the mercy we have experienced from God to others in need of that same mercy.

As we consider the example of the wicked servant,

it naturally invites the question,

“What keeps us from offering compassion and mercy to others when we have received so much?”

I would also argue that the real danger, or the real torture,

comes not from God, but rather from ourselves –
a consequence of our own actions when we choose to hold a grudge,
or choose to hold on to hatred and resentment,
instead of practicing forgiveness.

How many characters in novels or movies end up bitter and half-alive
because they have dwelt on a wrong for years or even decades?

It happens in real life too, of course.

I don't often tell stories in sermons,

and you've already heard one this morning:

perhaps there is a full moon or strange alignment of stars – who knows;

but either way, I promise this next one is very short.

If you read the parish e-news that went out yesterday,

you'll have read my reflection on Rosamond Herklots,

the author of a hymn in our hymnal,

which she titled "The Unforgiving Heart."

The idea for the text came to her as she was doing some weeding

in her garden,

and she realized that the way the weeds were choking out

the flowers and good growth

was akin to the way sin chokes out the good growth in the Christian's life.

Rosamond Herklots had also been very estranged from her sister,

and realized the damage it was doing to her own heart and soul.

In other words, she knew the torture that is inflicted on one's self

by brooding on past wrongs and injuries.

It is knowledge of that backstory that brings poignancy

to the following lines from that hymn text, penned by Rosamond,

which I now leave you with:

"Forgive our sins as we forgive,"
you taught us, Lord, to pray;
but you alone can grant us grace
to live the words we say.

How can your pardon reach and bless
the unforgiving heart
that broods on wrongs and will not let
old bitterness depart?

In blazing light your cross reveals
the truth we dimly knew,
how small the debts men owe to us,

how great our debt to you.

How great our debt, indeed.

How often should I forgive the friend or mother or brother or stranger
who sins against me, Lord?

Seven times?

“No,” you tell us, “seventy-seven times.”

Lord, give us this grace always.

Amen.