

July 23, 2017

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A mid-summer Sunday, sort of. We're already a month past the longest day of the year, but we're about halfway through school vacation. And we're exactly in the middle of my summer sermons about "Be the Church". Today our two lines are: forgive often and embrace diversity.

It's no coincidence that forgiveness is at the very center of our Christian faith. There's a powerful and pithy Celtic riddle about forgiveness. It asks: What are the three sources of new life? Answer: (1) a woman's belly (2) an egg (3) a forgiven sin. Christianity is about new life in Christ; forgiveness is how we get there.

Huston Smith, a renowned scholar of world religions, once gave an introductory lecture on the most important and unique aspects of each major world religion. In Islam, he noted, Muslims pray throughout the day in a way that makes faith permeate every moment. In Hinduism, he admired the complexity of the faith and its attempt to include every aspect of reality. What, do you suppose, was the one aspect of Christianity he lifted up? Forgiveness.

As Jesus was dying, in unimaginable pain, he forgave those who killed him. We could have chosen that as our scripture lesson for today:

*"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* On Jesus' journeys throughout Israel, he healed many people, often with the words: *"Your sins are forgiven. Now go and forgive others."* And in the scripture passage we read this morning, Jesus commanded his followers to be extravagant in their mercy. Peter questions how many times forgiveness should be offered, Jesus says 70 times 7. In the Hebrew idiom, that's the same as saying "an infinite number of times" – there is no limit.

How do we – how CAN we – live out this infinite forgiveness as a cornerstone of our faith? Do we pay attention to it, truthfully, both in scripture and in history? Is it at, or near, the top of our spiritual disciplines? Have we ever thought deeply about forgiveness?

In Forgiveness: How to Make Peace with Your Past and Get on with Your Life, Sidney and Suzanne Simon talk first about what forgiveness is NOT.

1. Forgiveness is not forgetting. “Forgive and forget” is an inappropriate saying. We do not forget the hurt/the debt/the sin – whatever we call the source of pain. We need to remember it in order not to repeat the behavior which caused it.
2. Forgiveness is not about condoning the sin. “Oh, that’s ok, it didn’t really hurt me,” is also inappropriate. Forgiveness is not about excusing or rationalizing hurtful behavior. We must not ignore our pain or others’
3. Forgiveness is not about the pardon. It may or may not get the offender off the hook legally for bad behavior: but that is not the point for the one doing the forgiving. We offer forgiveness on the heart level.
4. And forgiveness is not a cover up or an excuse for wrongdoing. It is, rather, about neutralizing the effects of the original sin instead of adding fuel to the fire. It is about healing the brokenness rather than making it worse.

So what IS forgiveness? Let’s begin with an oblique approach. You all know and have experienced what it means to be angry. This is a bit of a trick question: what is the opposite of being angry? Automatically, most of us would probably say it is being peaceful, calm, loving. That is true. But very specifically, the opposite of being angry is to be merciful, forgiving. When we are angry, we hold on to bitterness and hostility and revenge. When we are merciful, we release the hurt and experience freedom from the burden of retained anger.

Granting forgiveness, being merciful, is one of the very hardest things we humans can do. It is often a big problem in church communities because of the failure of church members to truly forgive one another – and that’s not just counting the “big things” like conflict over a pastor, or differences in theology. So often it’s the little things: our frustrations with leadership or an off-hand unkind comment. Anger can be like a charcoal fire, fueled by lots of little things, but lasting long and burning slowly. Such smoldering coals can be the death of a church community.

Here’s the real secret about the amazing truth of forgiveness: it always involves some measure of sacrifice on the part of the one who is forgiving! It is a gift to the sinner,

being released from guilt. Forgiveness may mean that the one who forgives actually suffers a penalty instead of the one who is forgiven. It costs something, a price that ranges from pride to actual money to even one's life. That is what it cost Jesus.

But the gain from forgiving is immense: it is a release from the patterns of a destructive relationship and from the slow burn of resentment and anger. It is the opportunity to go into the future with a clean slate.

God is the original forgiver as well as the one originally sinned against. God releases our sins and bears the cost of them, the very life of the human being Jesus. God does not minimize our sins: they are still painful. But God does release us from them and from the cost of walking around with that burden. That, friends, is both true forgiveness and the most amazing grace the world has ever – or will ever – known. And it is a story unique to Christianity.

One of my online colleagues, the Rev. Jenee Woodard, says:

“I don't forgive people in order to be nice to them, or because Jesus says to do it. I forgive people as the grace-filled result of the process of healing, and of the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus, of becoming the subject of my own life once more, instead of being the object of the one who wronged me. I forgive them in order to take back my power within the relationship.”

Take a moment to think of an example when you forgave someone, and the gift was really to yourself.

Forgiveness is a powerful tool in our own individual lives. And it can be an even more potent tool for the whole community: for God's grace gives us freedom and responsibility to make that grace known to others.

Forgiveness is also a collective way of living, a goal for the whole community: to set all of creation in right relationship, to restore shalom, to live into God's Kingdom.

And that leads us straight into the second topic of this sermon: to embrace diversity. God's creation was made in splendiferous diversity, of geography and climate, of flora and fauna, and especially the diverse cultures and expressive arts of many ethnicities. As we are called to the work of restoring and stewarding this abundant creation, we by definition must embrace it all.

These words “Embrace Diversity” are not found in scripture per se. But in looking for a passage to illustrate the practice of cultural inclusiveness, we can do no better than to turn to the story of Pentecost. All those gathered there on that day suddenly understood one another, as people spoke in languages they didn’t even know. Everyone is challenged by reading this passage with all its names of ancient people and places. And it is always a good thing to try to speak the languages of others and to open ourselves to different cultural values in the context of healing God’s creation.

Perhaps we can best understand “embrace diversity” by examining its opposite: “practice exclusiveness, xenophobia, and cultural superiority.” It’s incredibly easy for a dominant culture to think that the norms and behaviors it practices are the “right way” of doing things. This means everything from the way we dress, to whether we look someone in the eye when speaking or not, to tattoos, to language, to worship customs. Most people think that the way they do it is the right way.

The practice of sitting under the lemonade tent every Wednesday has multiplied my appreciation for the diversity of this city. There is, of course, a wonderful mix of immigrants in this area that is quite noticeable among those walking our sidewalks, along with a smattering of foreign-born tourists as well. But there is also an amazing diversity among the majority Caucasian population, ranging from new arrivals that are entering college or a new job to those who are seeking social service help or even a clean start after being in recovery. They come with skateboards and bicycles, with tattoos and pink hair, with canes or walkers or wheelchairs, with ties and dresses to tattered jeans. Each one has a story to tell. Each one has something they are seeking. Each one will benefit from being accepted, from being embraced, and especially from being forgiven, whether they yet know the power of that grace or not.

And for those of us doing our best to put our Christianity into practice: exposure to this diversity helps us not to fall into the trap that smoldering begrudging anger can set for us. It is so easy to blame the “Other” for our own unhealed wounds and grudges. But if forgiveness is at the center of our spiritual practice, then blame becomes meaningless and there is no reason to treat those who are different from us in a hateful way.

I leave with one of the most powerful stories of forgiveness I’ve ever heard:

It comes from the time of the Truth Commission trials in South Africa, after Nelson Mandela became the president there.

“A seventy year old black woman stood up. Across the courtroom were several white police officers who had been found guilty of murdering her husband and son some years before. One officer had taken her son and shot him point blank and then burned his body. Several years later, the same man came back and arrested the woman’s husband. Two years later, he came back and picked up the woman. He showed her that her husband was still alive, then poured gasoline over him and set him on fire as she watched. The woman heard the officer’s confession, and then was asked what she wanted.

‘I want three things.’ she said. “I want to be taken to the place where my husband was burned so I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial. Then, since my husband and my son were my only family, I want this police officer to become my son. I would like him to come twice a month to the ghetto where I live and spend a day with me, so I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining with me. And finally, I want this officer to know that I offer him forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive me. I kindly ask that someone come to my side now and lead me across this courtroom, so that I can take this officer in my arms, embrace him, and let him know he is truly forgiven.”

As she walked across the room, the officer, overwhelmed by all he heard, fainted. The family and friends of the woman, all victimized by decades of oppression by apartheid, softly began to sing “Amazing Grace. ”

Be the Church. Forgive often. And embrace diversity.