

September 14, 2014
The Rev. John Forman
Matthew 18:21-35

We are just three days past the 13th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks and America is once again considering military action in the Middle East. The temptation to hear this morning's readings about forgiveness within that context is powerful. But that would most likely lead us into geopolitical arguments like those in the media—arguments that tend to divide rather than unite.

If you are at all like me, you may even be divided in your own thinking: On the one hand, while I'm not a pacifist, I do strive and pray to be a man of peace. On the other hand, I come from a military family—my father was a Navy pilot, his brother died in the response to Pearl Harbor and my sister was an Army nurse in Korea. I understand the need for military interventions, but I hate when we must resort to them. On one point, I am clear: we, the church, do not do enough for our veterans, especially those who have seen combat. And there will be more men and women coming from a variety of broken circumstances who need the church.

That clarity also puts our readings in a more constructive, hopeful context, because I am also clear that what the church can offer is a union of justice and mercy, in the form of forgiveness. Justice seasons mercy like salt seasons meat; mercy complements and perfects justice. Forgiveness transcends and includes a wide range of political views, making room at this table for everyone. What the church can offer a broken world, in a way that no one else can, is an experience of God's forgiveness.

Now, Matthew's Jesus is not naïve. He is well aware of the geopolitics surrounding the emerging community of followers. Most people in 1st century Palestine, including Jesus' disciples, expected the Messiah to be an emissary of God who would intervene with *political power* to stop violence, oppression and warfare. We can so easily slip into a similar expectation, but God seems, instead, to work through our hearts and actions. Throughout Matthew 18, Jesus has been teaching us, through Peter, how to live together in wholeness. Without denying the pain and sorrow in the world, Jesus pointed Peter and the disciples—and us—to a way to live with each other as an oasis of wholeness in the midst of a broken world. In the same way, without ignoring events where most of us have the least influence and authority, Jesus turns us to the one place where we have the *most* influence and authority: ourselves. Ironically, the way we can change the world around us is to change the world within us.

You see, the forgiveness that Jesus is talking about happens in a specific community—in a church community; right here in our hearts and minds. Peter has asked Jesus how often he should forgive another Christian brother or sister. He suggests seven times. Now, seven is a holy number in Jewish numerology that represents perfection, fullness, abundance and completion. Peter is also certainly aware of the prophet Amos' reference to God forgiving transgression three times with the warning that God may not withhold punishment for the fourth. So Peter is suggesting an expanded understanding of God's forgiveness and a *lavish* human forgiveness.

In response, Jesus points to a still larger, deeper forgiveness that resonates with God's relentless love and limitless mercy—a forgiveness beyond our capacities to understand, let alone recreate. There's a country/western song that says "who keeps on sayin' that he still wants you, when you're through runnin' around and who keeps on lovin' you when you've been lyin', sayin' things that ain't what they seem? Well, God does, but I don't. God will, but I won't, and that's the difference between God and me."

Noticing "the difference between God and me" can actually be a gift. When we find those situations and people where God does, but I don't, God will, but I won't, we *could* choose to stop trying because, after all, we are only human. Or we could choose to wallow in guilt because we aren't acting in a way that aligns with what we believe. But there's a third option and that is to recognize that we are at a growth edge. We can get a taste of the vastness of God's forgiveness at the edge of our own inability to forgive. Aspiring to God's forgiveness—*aspiring* to God's forgiveness—is how we come to understand just how far short we fall and how much we really do rely on God. Fortunately, God works with our even our smallest efforts.

Jesus' parable evokes a vision of a *godly* way of canceling debts, but we have to be particularly careful with this parable. The forgiveness of debt was not unheard of in Matthew's day. Whenever a bad crop season or other situations forced rulers to forgive taxes, they did so with the understanding that all those who had been forgiven would also release the debts of those who owed them. Matthew's audience knew the principle well and would have expected the first slave to have understood it. I think we distort Jesus' meaning if we insist that king in this story represents God. The king's opening order to sell the slave, his wife and children is not Godlike, nor is his final order to torture the first slave who was expected to follow the social convention. These are human actions that would have made sense to Matthew's community.

So while the parable does represent humans *seeking* to be forgiving, the actions of the king are not in keeping with the actions of a God who brings life out of death—

who inspires life-giving behaviors out of death-dealing circumstances. And we, you and I, are nothing less than the incarnation of that God-energy here in Burien in the fall of 2014, aspiring to forgive as relentlessly as God does and has and will.

So how do we go about aspiring to forgive as God does? First, *godly* forgiveness begins with trying to see each other as the people that Christ sees. Forgiveness is never the same as condoning behaviors because some behaviors are simply not acceptable. And sometimes pardoning the unrepentant is simply license, not mercy. But to be *godly*, forgiveness must be liberating. Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a woman who had been abandoned by her husband and left alone to support herself and three children. She struggled to feed her family while her ex-husband spent lavishly on his new wife in another state. When asked how he could expect her to forgive this man, Rabbi Kushner said, "I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't; it was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you are hurting yourself."¹

The choice to forgive has liberated people in far worse circumstances: choosing to liberate themselves through forgiveness has allowed people who have been physically or emotionally abused to find new life. Choosing to liberate themselves through forgiveness has allowed people whose family members have been imprisoned or killed because of their religion or the color of their skin or because they live on land that has profitable natural resources—choosing to liberate themselves, *even as they deplore and protest the behavior*, has allowed people to find new life.

Jesus has told Peter and us that "...whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you *abolish* on earth will be *abolished* in heaven." To ask for and accept forgiveness means that you are ready to unbind another and yourself from the wrong you have confessed. *If* the other person *chooses* to forgive you, you are liberated from the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience, and they are liberated from the dismal corrosion of anger and bitterness added to the initial wounding. Forgiveness can liberate you both to seek peace together until you rejoice in each other's presence, bound to each other as though in heaven. God will use that momentum to establish and nurture one more island of God's peace and love where all are welcome.

¹ Harold Kushner, "Letting Go of the Role of the Victim," *Spirituality and Health*, Winter, 1999. 34.

Those who allow their inability to forgive, or to ask and be forgiven, cut themselves off from the body of Christ—separate from the very community that can help them. We can become imprisoned by the trauma either that we perpetrate or that has been done to us. Let me point out that the Greek translation of our scripture makes no mention of torture (another very un-Godlike behavior). The original Greek simply says that the slave was turned over the jailer. To bind oneself to an injustice—to choose to carry either the guilt or the pain—is the consequence. You become the jailer! And there's a lesson from those combat veterans that are already among us and whose numbers are increasing: the inability to forgive oneself is a powerful characteristic of the post-traumatic stress disorder that affects many of these people and others.

A community that can help liberate forgiveness is one where people practice manifesting at least some small portion of God's grace in our relationships with our Christian brothers and sisters. Rather than imprisoning each other or ourselves, we can seek God's help in creating a safe landing for all kinds of people with all kinds of wounding. In time, we and they will encounter a growing community of people sustained by God's miraculous forgiveness—a church full of people committed to forgiveness as a way of life. We will not abandon anyone. We will refuse to be abandoned. When we are invited to the table, we will come joyfully, at peace with God and with each other.