

Forgiveness Is ... Complicated

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
March 24, 2019 – 3rd Sunday of Lent
Text: Matthew 18:21-35

I came across a meme – a sort of on-line poster – on Facebook several months that I just loved. It was a cartoon of the disciple Peter with his head in his hands as he sat on a rock and Jesus in the background. The caption read, “Oh great. Not only does he say I have to forgive everyone, now I have to do math too!” Of course, this is a reference to the first verses of the scripture text we read a few minutes ago – the one describing the exchange between Peter who was always trying to be a suck-up to Jesus, and Jesus himself. Peter had posed a question to Jesus about how often it was necessary to forgive someone. Then he quickly offers his own answer of seven. Jesus’ answer is not what he expected because Jesus says, “no, seventy-seven” sometimes also translated as “seventy times seven.” See? Math...

The math part of this text has always been a little confusing to most of us because what’s up with setting a number of times for forgiveness? Turns out, that is actually biblical. In Jewish tradition, it is believed that one should forgive a person for the same offense three times and then the fourth time the offense is committed, it becomes a matter for God to punish. So, when Peter offered the idea of forgiving someone for the same thing

seven times, he thought he was being very generous! After all, seven was double the three times called for, plus one more. No doubt Peter was expecting Jesus to say, “great job, Peter!” But he didn’t. Instead he said, “not seven times, but seventy-seven times” which meant an endless number of times. No doubt Peter was confused which was why Jesus immediately launches into the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

This parable is not one we often talk about because, let’s be honest, it’s not exactly a pleasant one. A king decides to settle accounts with his slaves, and he does so according to the amount owed to him by each. Thus, the first slave brought into him owes him ten thousand talents – an exorbitant sum which today would translate into millions of dollars. Biblical scholars think this means that this slave was in fact a regional administrator of some sort, rather than a household slave, who had not been paying the taxes due the king which is why the amount was so large. In any event, the king orders the man and his whole family to be sold to pay the debt at which point the man pleads for mercy. The king, taking pity on the man, forgives the entire debt. But, as the man was leaving the palace, he encountered someone who owed him a small debt – a hundred denarii which was about three months’ wages for a day laborer. The man couldn’t pay it and pleaded for mercy but the other man refused and ordered him thrown into prison and tortured until he should pay the debt. What he didn’t

realize was that other slaves witnessed this exchange and quickly reported it to the king who was not happy. He ordered the man back and, calling him wicked, chastised him for not showing mercy as he had been shown mercy. The king ordered him thrown into prison and tortured. Yikes!

The point of this parable is fairly simple. Jesus was illustrating the idea that one must forgive in order to be forgiven. If God is the king in the parable, then the man was forgiven a lifetime of sin. Punishment was not deferred or delayed. It was eliminated through the boundless gift of forgiveness. But, this one who had been forgiven an enormous debt which was quite literally impossible to repay, refused to extend even a fraction of the same mercy to someone else only minutes after he himself had been forgiven on such a grand scale. In other words, the man learned nothing from being forgiven. He was not transformed by it. He took it for granted, perhaps even feeling it was his due. And because he had not truly understood or appreciated the enormity of the forgiveness he had been given, he did not himself forgive someone else for far less than what he had himself been forgiven. And the king – God – was having none of it. In other words, in this parable Jesus is telling us we must forgive others as God has forgiven us. Forgiveness is not an option. It is a must. And that's where it gets complicated.

Forgiveness gets complicated because we can all think of examples where the notion of forgiving someone for a serious wrong committed against us or someone we love seems impossible, incomprehensible, not to mention unwarranted. How can a murderer be forgiven for murdering without remorse? How can a child molester or a drug dealer or a grifter who steals thousands of dollars from innocent victims be forgiven? How can genocide be forgiven? How can chemical warfare be forgiven? And what about all those personal situations we all suffer where forgiveness is needed but so very difficult to come by: the best friend who betrays us, the supervisor at work who looks the other way when a job is taken away, the family member who deliberately hurts us just to make some point. How can it be that forgiveness is required in all those situations? That just does not make any sense!

Right. Precisely. It does not make any sense to us at all to offer forgiveness in situations in which one has been so grievously and intentionally harmed. It makes no sense to forgive when punishment is obviously warranted, when justice demands that something be done so that the egregious behavior is not repeated. Forgiveness in some instances is just wrong! It must be. It has to be, we think. Otherwise, we are saying the wrong isn't wrong. Well, that would be true if we are thinking of forgiveness as some gigantic art-gum eraser that just tries to wipe out the injustice, the

sin, whatever it was, like it never happened. But that's not forgiveness. Forgiveness does not negate the offense for which forgiveness is needed. Forgiveness recognizes the sin, keenly and deeply, for exactly what it is. Forgiveness acknowledges fully the pain the offense causes and then reaches beyond it to offer release of the offense and the offender to God. Forgiveness requires, as we talked about last week, a different kind of love – agape love which is divine love. It is not the love humans have for each other. It is as far beyond that as the heavens are above our heads. Agape love is only possible through God and that is what makes it, and forgiveness, so very difficult ... and so very complicated. But not impossible.

An example of impossible forgiveness becoming possible is recounted in the book, *Forgiving As We've Been Forgiven* written by Celestin Musekura and L. Gregory Jones. In this book Musekura writes about his experiences with the Rwandan genocide of the 1990's. He grew up as a Hutu in Rwanda and was out of the country at graduate school in Kenya when the civil war broke out between the Hutu and the Tutsi. Atrocities were committed by both sides and the bloodshed was incomprehensible. Musekura says he felt compelled to go back into his home country to undertake a ministry of reconciliation in the refugee camps which he did. He and others even formed the group ALARM – African Leadership And Reconciliation

Ministries for the purpose of educating church and civil leaders about the need for forgiveness and reconciliation if the country was to be able to move forward in hope. He was successful in this work and came to the United States to do more graduate work in this field. While he was here studying, his own village was attacked by government troops and six members of his family were brutally murdered. In that moment, all his work around forgiveness and reconciliation seemed empty and hollow. He plunged deep into grief and anger, and was almost overcome by a powerful desire for revenge. But, he says, God intervened once again. God confronted him with a new and deeper awareness that the God who forgives unconditionally calls the forgiven into a life of forgiveness. (Jones & Musekura, p. 23) He realized that his only way forward was through forgiveness, even for this unthinkable atrocity. “Through forgiveness,” he writes, “a possibility of a new hope and a new future is created between perpetrator and victim.” (Jones & Musekura, p. 23) In other words, he recognized with startling clarity that the only way to move forward was to refuse to “submit to the bondage of unforgiveness.” (Jones & Musekura, p. 23) He knew that if he gave in to his hatred and desire for revenge against those who had murdered his family, it would never end. He would become part of the brutality and hatred that had killed his family and destroyed his country and he refused to do that. He simply refused. Eventually he did find people

connected to his family's murder and he did forgive them. Shortly after that, he found out that his mother and adopted sister had escaped and survived. It is the family of those who killed his family that now care for them. That, dear friends, is impossible forgiveness made possible. That is new life, new hope, realized.

Believe it or not, this is not the only such story of impossible forgiveness we could talk about. They are in fact, legion. Just not all that well publicized. One you may recall happened 14 years ago not too far away in West Nickel Mines, PA when a lone, mentally disturbed gunman went into an Old Order Amish one room schoolhouse and killed five little girls. He let the boys go. He let mothers and babies go. The teacher escaped and ran to the farm next door to call police. They arrived minutes later and that's when he started shooting, the last shot reserved for himself, ending his life. Sadly, school shootings are no rarity in our country but this one was particularly horrendous, bringing death to the children of a simple, peace loving religious community for reasons no one will every fully understand. But what's really remarkable about this story is not the evil and the innocent lives lost. What's remarkable is how the Amish responded. While the police were still inside the school and the dead and wounded were still being evacuated, an Amish man present said to the Amish children and adults surrounding himfor , and to the media encircling them, "We must not think evil of this man. ... He had a

mother, a wife and a soul and is standing now before a just God.” (Wikipedia, *West Nickle Mines School Shooting*) But the Amish didn’t stop there. Within hours, they were at the home of the shooter’s wife and his parents, not to condemn but to offer comfort and forgiveness for what the shooter had done. It is reported that an Amish man stayed with the shooter’s father for over an hour, just holding him while he cried. 30 Amish people attended the funeral for the shooter and the shooter’s wife was invited to one their own funerals, something that never happens with outsiders.

We should note that the Amish received criticism for this response of unrestricted forgiveness. They were accused of denying the existence of the evil which caused the shooting in the first place. But the Amish disagreed as their actions made plain. The Amish themselves never responded to this criticism but, according to Donald Kraybill, an Amish scholar, their response was reflective of a core belief of their faith – that letting go of grudges was the only way to hold on to hope for the future.

So, forgiveness is personal. It’s necessary. And, it’s complicated. Very, very complicated. But as Celestin Musekura and the Amish of West Nickel Mines learned firsthand, it is absolutely necessary if one is to live a life filled with hope, and light and possibility. This “horizontal forgiveness” (Jones & Musekura, p. 23) is possible because it does not come from us, but

from God. It is not forgiveness given as a means of therapeutic self-help for the one wronged. Rather it is the only way forward for everyone the wrong touches, through the pain and the damage the wrong creates.

I'd like to close with the words of Celestin Musekura as he described how he was able to forgive those perpetrators of his family and friends' deaths as he did:

“I prayed and asked God to grant me grace and strength to forgive the killers of my family and friends. Then I declared forgiveness to the perpetrators. God set me free so I had to set my enemies free.”

Impossible forgiveness as freedom – from hate, from revenge, from becoming enmeshed in an endless spiral of darkness. Instead, forgiveness as the gateway to freedom. Imagine that. Amen.