

September 13, 2020 (Focus: Matthew 18:21-35)

[note: these are written partly as outline, but I think the gist of the message is clear. LMS]

Telling others earlier this week – not an easy time to have to preach about forgiveness...this week where we hear tapes of our president telling a reporter that he knew early on how serious this virus was, he knew early on how it was spread via the air, and yet he concealed that info from the public and downplayed the danger, which meant that tens of thousands more died that would have been necessary; that is hard to forgive. And as of this morning we are nearing 195,000 dead, and still he downplays it, and shows little compassion for the sick and the grieving and those fighting this disease on the front lines and those whose work or schooling put them in harm's way, like those lives don't matter, that is hard to forgive.

It's a difficult time to have to contemplate forgiveness, as people's lives, people's livelihoods, school are messed up, we only get to look at each other on a screen when we would so much like and need to be with one another, let alone all the other injustices and atrocities being perpetuated or ignored by our leaders these days. I'm wondering if it is possible to forgive leaders who perpetuate such wrongs, or those who are complicit in their silence or support.

But then again, this all makes it an ideal time to wrestle with such a vital spiritual practice. Its funny how God's Word can be like that, this three-year cycle of readings that somehow so often fits our times.

More to forgiveness than can be unpacked in 10-15 minutes, so important a spiritual topic...talk about it at least another week...

What is forgiveness? Maybe best to start with what it is not...Not forgetting, not absolving, not saying not wrong or no injury, not about weakness (Gandhi: The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.)

Lots of questions around forgiveness. Is forgiveness always possible? We pray about forgiveness every time we pray the Lord's prayer, which speaks that which we often times don't recognize – that not only are we called to forgive, but that we also often need forgiveness...in fact, asking for forgiveness comes first in the prayer, before it talks about our forgiving others...maybe forgiving is easier when we have recognized we need forgiving ourselves... Golden rule: do unto others as you would have then do unto you, not as they do to you – not about revenge...

Pilgrims – needed to forgive those who persecuted them, then needed to be forgiven for what they did to natives in their new home

How do we forgive? Do need apology first? What if other doesn't believe did something wrong? What if person is no longer alive? Do we have to tell the other person we are forgiving them? Do need reconciliation for forgiveness to be complete?

Who is forgiveness for? To Jesus: it seems to be mostly about community – if no forgiveness, then community broken up. Not dealing with modern ideas of psychology, which says forgiveness mostly for oneself...move past the hurt, the injury, no longer be under their control because as long as can't forgive, they are in your life you're your heart...freedom to have other relationships...there is no peace without forgiveness (which makes me mad, that I have to do the work for being wounded)...Mark Twain: forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.

Not seven but seventy seven times... does mean need to forgive seventy seven different things, or that will take seventy seven times of saying "I forgive" before really feel it...

In exploring this question of forgiveness again, I came across a reference to a book by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho Tutu, "The Book of Forgiving: the fourfold path for healing ourselves and our world" ...comes from their experience in post-apartheid South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission...institutionalized racism, inequality, oppression, protests and violence...would transition to democracy for all become a bloodbath of revenge and retaliation...we could understand if that would be the case, especially for leader Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for decades and now leading the post apartheid transition...

how do we forgive?...In the introduction Desmond Tutu writes: "It seems there is no end to the creative ways we humans can find to hurt each other, and no end to the reasons we feel justified in doing so. There is also no end to the human capacity for healing. In each of us, there is an innate ability to create joy out of suffering, to find hope in the most hopeless of situations, and to heal any relationship in need of healing." (repeat)

Tutu goes on to say something equally hopeful, but maybe less believable "I would like to share with you two simple truths: there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of forgiveness. When you can see and

understand that we are all bound to one another—whether by birth, by circumstance, or simply by our shared humanity—then you will know this to be true. I have often said that in South Africa there would have been no future without forgiveness. Our rage and our quest for revenge would have been our destruction. This is as true for us individually as it is for us globally.”

A life of faith is hard. Forgiveness is a question of time and practice, and there may be times when we struggle to arrive at a place of forgiveness, and we fear we have fallen short...after all, didn't Jesus forgive those who crucified him?...but wait, let's look at what he said there on the cross..."Father, forgive them, they know not what they do"... Jesus as victim, not him forgiving (maybe not yet), but asking God to do what he cannot...Jesus prays for those who have abused him and killed him, but it is not an explicit act of forgiveness. Maybe that is a model for us, when we cannot yet find our way to forgiveness: pray for those who have wronged us, and ask God to forgive them...Leave it to God, while we yet wrestle with it...even if it takes us seven times seventy seven...leave it to God, to bless us as we wrestle, to redeem those whom we wrestle with forgiving...

And why go on with the difficult work of wrestling with forgiveness? Again I turn to Desmond Tutu: "In our own ways, we are all broken. Out of that brokenness, we hurt others. Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts. It is how we become whole again...The quality of human life on our planet is nothing more than the sum total of our daily interactions with one another. Each time we help, and each time we harm, we have a dramatic impact on our world...Forgiveness is the way we set those interactions right. It is the way we mend tears in the social fabric. It is the way we stop our human community from unraveling...our nature is goodness. Yes, we do much that is bad, but our essential nature is good. If it were not, then we would not be shocked and dismayed when we harm one another...We live surrounded by so much love, kindness, and trust that we forget it is remarkable. Forgiveness is the way we return what has been taken from us and restore the love and kindness and trust that has been lost."

Children's message: blessing of the pets

Loving Creator God, we give you thanks for these wonderful companions, the great dogs and cats and lizards and snakes and birds and turtles and whatever else it is that we call pet/friend/family. We ask you to bless them and keep them, shine your face upon them and be gracious to them, look upon them with kindness, and keep them well and grant them peace. We offer our thanks to those pets whom we have lost, as we hold dear our memories of their playfulness, mischievousness, and loving care and companionship. Bless all the beasts and all of us, and help us to care for our planet so that we may all thrive. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Let us turn our hearts and minds to God in prayer.

Merciful God, we come to this time of worship from the world, and we bring the world in with us, for it weighs heavy on our hearts, because we truly care, and because we know things could be better in our world. It feels like so much of the cares and concerns of the world right now are somehow wrapped up in breath. There are those who cannot breathe for all the smoke in the air out west due to the wild fires, who cannot breathe as they gasp at the site of their burned out homes and business, or as they gaze at the flames coming ever near.

There are those whose breathing is compromised by this deadly virus we are struggling with, and those whose breath is taken away from them, and those who gasp for breath as tears and sobs of grief overwhelm them. There are those whose breath is taken away from them with a knee on their neck or a hood over their face, and those who are breathless with ongoing protests because not enough is being done to stop our national sin of racism.

And there are those who cannot breathe deeply enough because of stress, trying to keep families together with little breathing room as the lines between home and work and school narrow, as jobs are threatened or lost, as the pressure of isolation and uncertainty weigh down on us. Breathe new breath into us, O Spirit of the living God. Fall afresh on us. Help us to breathe new life and new hope into our communities, especially in these uncertain times. With each breath we take, help us to be filled with your patience, your hope, your joy, your strength, your courage, your love.

With each breath we exhale, help us to remember those we hold in our hearts and prayers for your healing wholeness of body, mind, and spirit...

With each breath we take in and exhale, help us to remember that it is through us that your love and mercy flow, that your hope and a vision for a peaceable community of mutual respect and caring will be made real, as we taught to us by the one we call messiah, son of the living God, who taught us to pray to you saying, Our Father...