

September 14, 2008
“The Circle of Forgiveness”

Prelude Meditation

Forgiveness is the act of admitting that we are like other people.
-- Christina Baldwin

Romans 14:1-6
Matthew 18:21-25

One of the things I’ve especially enjoyed hearing in this congregation over the last couple of years is how frustrating one woman finds Jesus’ parables. I love hearing her objections. I find her honesty and openness refreshing ... and inspiring. This woman is genuinely interested in the teachings of Jesus, but she just wishes he had been a little clearer, a little easier to understand, a little more often.

Parables *are* rich in meaning and ambiguity, so they can also be rich sources of frustration and uncertainty. I think I understand this woman’s frustration, and I can join her in wishing for a little more clarity. Ah, but we do indeed need to be careful what we wish for! We can wish for more clarity, but then something like Jesus’ teaching from this morning’s reading comes along – no, you don’t have to forgive someone who’s harmed you seven times; you must forgive seventy-seven times! We can wish for clarity, but then we get it and it’s easy to start wishing for a little more *ambiguity*, instead, because the clarity we’ve been given is mighty challenging.

Maybe it would have been better – or at least easier – if in this story Jesus had answered Peter by telling a parable about mustard seeds, yeast, a man with two sons, or a woman with two daughters. If Jesus had responded to Peter with nothing but a parable and omitted any reference to seven or seventy or seventy-seven, you and I might have been able to find a little wiggle room in the parable to get us off the hook when we don’t feel like forgiving someone. We might have been able to do some parable interpretation that left it a little less clear that Jesus is teaching his disciples to forgive far more often than most of us want to forgive and far more often than most of us seem *able* to forgive.

But there really isn’t any wiggle room as Matthew tells the story. “How often should I forgive?” Peter asks. “As many as seven times?” Jesus answers, “Oh, no, not seven times. Seventy-seven times.”

Granted, we *could* quibble about the details of Peter’s question, because it’s translated, “If another member of the church sins against me ...” But that’s not the meaning of the Greek in the earliest manuscripts we have. In Greek, Peter’s question is, “If my brother sins against me ...” In trying to translate the Bible so that all people, male and female, are considered part of the human race, the people who brought us this translation narrowed the meaning of Peter’s question, so that it’s focused on members of the church. It’s much truer to the message of the Gospel to translate the question in this way: “If any of my brothers or sisters sins against me,” so that its meaning is, “If anyone sins against me, how often should I forgive?”

For a moment, though, let’s use the narrower translation and assume that the ones we are directed to forgive and forgive and forgive are only other members of the church. Then we’d have the problem of *which* church is the church whose members we’re

directed to forgive. The worldwide church? The United Church of Christ? Maybe just the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ? That's getting a little more manageable.

Or we could really limit our focus by saying it's only members of this one congregation we need to try to forgive over and over again. Even if we read Jesus' call to forgiveness to apply to as small a group of church members or brothers and sisters as possible, do you think we could honestly claim that we've done what Jesus instructed Peter to do? Have you and I as individuals and have we as a congregation offered and asked for forgiveness as abundantly as seventy-seven times to each and every person who has passed through those doors? No, my friends, I don't think we have.

There are people here today and people who are not here today who need to offer forgiveness to one another but have not offered it, and there are people who are here today and people who are not here today who need to be offered forgiveness but have not had it offered to them.

The Holy One made known in the life and ministry of Jesus and in workings of the Holy Spirit calls us to be ready to offer forgiveness unceasingly, and the Holy One also calls us to ask for forgiveness from one another and from the loving, holy Source of life. No ambiguity; no ifs, ands, or buts. The call is to forgive and to ask forgiveness.

But why? Why is this such a non-negotiable demand of the God made known through Jesus? Why is forgiveness one of the last words of Jesus on the cross? And why is forgiveness central to Lord's Prayer, whether we're asking for forgiveness of debts, trespasses, or sins? Is this call to forgive and seek forgiveness simply a way of trying to keep the peace among all of God's people, of whatever faith or belief? Or is it something deeper, something at the heart of what it means to be created and beloved of God?

This morning's reading on forgiveness comes to us in the lectionary cycle shortly before the beginning of Judaism's High Holy Days, and I think that's no accident. The High Holy Days begin on the evening of September 29, when our brothers and sisters in Congregation Shir Shalom and around the world will celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, and they end ten days later on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. These holy days are rich in tradition and meaning, and I can't pretend to know the fullness of all the observances. One thing I do know, though, is that the High Holy Days culminate on Yom Kippur, when God forgives the people and the people are called to forgive one another.

So I should be asking, not simply why forgiveness is so central in *Christian* teaching, but why forgiveness is so central in *Christian and Jewish* teaching. I think a story from the author and healer Rachel Naomi Remen points us to the "something deeper" of the importance of forgiveness. Dr. Remen had gone to hear a well-known rabbi speak on Yom Kippur, that most holy of days, and she was expecting to hear about God's forgiveness.

"Instead," she writes, the rabbi "walked out into the congregation, took his infant daughter from his wife, and, carrying her in his arms, stepped up to the bimah or podium. The little girl was perhaps a year old and she was adorable. From her father's arms she smiled at the congregation. Every heart melted. Turning toward her daddy, she patted him on the cheek with her tiny hands. He smiled fondly at her and with his customary dignity began a rather traditional Yom Kippur sermon, talking about the meaning of the holiday.

“The baby girl, feeling his attention shift away from her, reached forward and grabbed his nose. Gently he freed himself and continued the sermon. After a few minutes, she took his tie and put it in her mouth. The entire congregation chuckled. The rabbi rescued his tie and smiled at his child. She put her tiny arms around his neck. Looking at us over the top of her head, he said, ‘Think about it. Is there anything she can do that you could not forgive her for?’ Throughout the room people began to nod in recognition, thinking perhaps of their own children and grandchildren. Just then, she reached u and grabbed his eyeglasses. Everyone laughed out loud.

“Retrieving his eyeglasses and settling them on his nose, the rabbi laughed as well. Still smiling, he waited for silence. When it came, he asked ‘And when does that stop? When does it get hard to forgive: At three? At seven’ At fourteen? At thirty-five? How old does someone have to be before you forget that everyone is a child of God?’”¹

* * *

Forgiveness, then, grows from the truth that everyone is a child of God and everyone *remains* a child of God. Like the rabbi’s daughter, we are all beloved creations of a God who seeks the world’s healing and wholeness through our healing and wholeness. As children of the Holy Mystery at the heart of the universe, we are blessed and beloved ... *and* we are always capable of damaging our relationship with the One who created and loves us, just as we are always capable of damaging our relationships with one another and with the rest of God’s creation. We are capable, in other words, of acting in ways that deny we are all children of God.

Repentance and forgiveness, then, are the sacred tools we have to try to repair our relationships with the Holy One and with others once they’ve been damaged. That doesn’t mean that all our broken or damaged relationships with one another can be repaired in this lifetime. Some relationships simply cannot be repaired or reconciled in this lifetime, for the damage may run too deep or the damage may be too likely to continue. Individual healing takes time, while healing and reconciliation in a relationship takes repentance, as well as forgiveness and time. When repentance, a true change of heart, does not happen, forgiveness may need to take place at a distance, so that more damage does not occur.

So we’re called to forgiveness because we are all children of God, holy creations in need of a chance to be welcomed back into relationship when we have caused harm, holy creations in need of remembering, as Christina Baldwin puts it, that we are like other people, never perfect, always in need of forgiveness.

But there’s something more. We need to forgive, so that we *ourselves* can heal, even when the relationship in which the harm occurred will never heal. We need to let go, so that we can move on. We need to forgive, not to forget, but to be able to break free of the harm done to us. Howard Jaffe, Rabbi of Temple Isaiah in Lexington, Massachusetts, puts it this way: “Forgiveness does not wipe the slate clean. It allows [you] to put the hurt, the disappointment, the failure, the betrayal in a place where it is no longer toxic, so your healing can take place.”²

Rabbi Jaffe also tells the story of another rabbi who put God’s call to forgive before his congregation as I have tried to do today. Later that week, a woman from the

¹ Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., *My Grandfather’s Blessings*, pp. 99-100.

² Rabbi Howard Jaffe, “Yom Kippur 5768,” www.templeisaiiah.net/rabbis_sermon/jaffe_yk_07.html

synagogue came to him, upset that he was asking her to forgive her ex-husband who had abandoned her and their children ten years before. His abandonment had led to some very difficult times, so the idea of forgiving him was not an attractive one. Her rabbi explained that forgiveness does not mean that we say the wrong done to us or others was okay, and it does not mean that we accept unacceptable behavior. Instead, he told her, forgiveness would allow her to let go of her ex-husband and to erase the power she still gave him to define her as a rejected woman.

And then he said, “Look, for ten years, you have been standing here in Massachusetts holding a hot coal in your hand, waiting for your ex-husband to come by so you could throw it at him. For the last ten years, he’s been living in New Jersey and you haven’t hurt him at all, but you have burnt yourself in the process. Can you understand forgiveness as a favor you do for yourself?”

We are called to forgive as a way of acknowledging and honoring the presence of God in the ones who have harmed us, so that they might be healed by that holy presence within themselves. And we are called to forgive, even when reconciliation seems impossible, so that the harm done to us doesn’t stay fresh, alive, and able to spread. We are called to forgive because we stand in need of forgiveness, just like everyone else, and we are called to forgive because that hot coal of refusing to forgive is burning our own hands and our own hearts.

And Jesus answered, “No, do not forgive seven times. Be prepared to forgive seventy-seven times.” In forgiveness lie hope, possibility, humility, and the grace of God. Be prepared to forgive seventy-seven times. So simple, so demanding. Let’s give it a try.

Amen.

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