

Forgiveness to Free Ourselves
Sunday, July 9, 2023, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
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Good morning All Saints, as I've been preparing to speak to you today, July 4th has come and gone. During these two weeks, we have witnessed the highest court in the land truncate access and reduce the protections for people of color and LGBTQ people. The court also seems to have forgotten compassion for those enslaved by student debt. The ruling found the structures that limit access of the poor to a college education and a sustainable life, irrelevant. It reeks of the old American myth that we get where we get purely by our own efforts, and that a debt is a debt no matter the context. In light of these disturbing actions, and the escalating polarization, xenophobia, and gun violence in our country, it seems a good time to reflect on the meaning and value of forgiveness in our lives today.

Let's start by looking at Jesus' words on the subject in today's text. In it, Jesus' uses a hyperbolic parable to illustrate forgiveness. It could be read as an ultimatum and a threat. It can be and has been misinterpreted literally as God saying, "You have been forgiven your debt, so forgive the debts others owe you, or you will be punished for everything you owe." On the face of it, it makes little sense that we can actually forgive from the heart when under threat, or when our struggles to forgive are fear-based. Furthermore, we can't live into our full goodness and the image of God if the Source of all goodness is going to isolate and punish us when we sin. That's not how human beings work. We must search further into the context.

Before the text for today, Jesus has shared his expectation that he will soon die, and in their fear, his disciples had begun to argue about who among them is the most important. Jesus' response to their competitiveness was to describe the ways of being in the world that are essential to beloved kingdom community:

- being at ease with your dependence on God and each other, like a child
- being assured that God will always seek you, especially when you are lost;
- grounding your importance in your belovedness, in a community of beloveds, not competing for position or power
- managing conflicts with honesty and openness, and without humiliation
- knowing that the Spirit will guide us as a community if we gather and ask

These are all messages of our Creator mother, who is gracious and full of mother love, forever faithful to her promises. She loves us the way that Hannah loved her child, crafting a beautiful robe to fit to each of us every step of our growth.

It is at this point as Jesus is teaching some of the essentials to beloved community, that Peter asks his question about the limits of forgiveness. Peter is not connecting the dots, and in that moment, he is blind to the grammar of grace, as we all are sometimes. I can imagine that Jesus was confounded by Peter's lack of comprehension, and time was short. So, Jesus offers a come home to Jesus' moment, saying in essence, "Wake up Peter! You live, move, and take every breath you have by and in the grace of God. How can you have been with me all this time and you still don't get that there is no ledger on forgiveness—not for you or for anybody else." Jesus spoke of forgiveness because he knew the effects of unforgiveness on individuals and communities. He knew that forgiveness must be a never-ending practice because we will continue to injure each other, unintentionally and intentionally, in ways that we see and in ways that we don't or can't. Forgiveness is essential in order to maintain community.

Before we go further, I want to clear up some confusion about what forgiveness is and what it is not. Forgiveness is not forgetting. In fact, it is toxic to be asked to forgive and forget. To forgive is not to ignore or dismiss the deep pain of abuse, assault, or dehumanization. It is not to put a false label on evil acts. Such was the advice given for millennium, from those holding power in the church, to victims of domestic violence and enslaved peoples, offered by those who were offenders and beneficiaries of the offence! We must acknowledge harm done and refuse to accept it either now or in the future. Forgetting is something that only time may take care of, but forgiveness is an act of volition which only the victim is qualified to make. We need to tell our stories in a way that honors the truth **and** doesn't harness us to a place of pain. This may sound good, but how do we get there?

Forgiveness can include telling your narrative, recognizing that it is a choice to tell it or not, and that sometimes, it might feel unsafe to do so. Yet, we all need to be able to tell our whole stories—the good, the bad, and the ugly. We know from research in human development, that telling our whole stories individually, and as a community, to one who is compassionate and honest, *no matter how painful that story is*, heals and interrupts intergenerational violence. This is why the good work of this church in telling our whole story as a community is so important. God knows us, down to the number of hairs on our heads and God knows our stories. God never stops loving us and sees the good in us, even when we can't see it ourselves—And not seeing it in ourselves is sometimes the reason why we can't forgive others.

Forgiveness often involves grief because when we forgive, we let go of the hope that the past can be changed. We can transcend it, we can prevent transmitting it to others, but change the past, we cannot. Jesus was fully at home with this tragic fact of life. He lived, died, and rose inside it. Jesus' ability to find a higher order inside constant disorder is the very heart of his

message—and why true Gospel, though frequently misinterpreted, still heals and renews all that it touches. In telling our stories to people who will listen, we get a glimpse of that higher order. It is spiritual resistance to accept and mourn as we work for change.

Forgiveness is often not immediate, but a process. In Hebrew scriptures, acknowledgment of injury, sorrow for the harm done, and acts of reparation were required for receiving forgiveness. These were and are very important steps in a healing. There can be no full restoration of broken relationships without these steps.

Yet, I believe Jesus is speaking in addition to this truth to something more:

How do we to free ourselves internally from harmful experience, and to reconnect to love, when acknowledgement is not forthcoming? When someone does us harm, we're connected to that mistreatment as if by a chain. That can fill us with resentment and desire for revenge. If we're not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy and, in some cases, even start to become them. We know medically that all of this effects our immune system, our heart health, our moods and our self-esteem.

Forgiveness is not saying it's okay. Nor is it passive, conceding to unjust practices. It is actually a way of wielding bolt cutters and snapping the chain that links us to the experience of being transgressed. Forgiveness is saying it's so not okay, I am not going to stay connected to it any more. I simply won't be tied to it. Forgiveness dethrones the power transgressors can have to define for us who we are.

This sheds a particular light on Jesus' command to forgive always. Forgiveness is the instruction to tell our stories. It frees us and grounds us again in our deepest humanity, the brilliant shining diamond at the center of every person, that nothing can touch. The Dalia Lama told a story of a Tibetan monk who had been imprisoned and horribly mistreated for years. Once he was freed, the Dalia Lama asked him what he feared most while imprisoned, and he responded, "Losing my compassion."

When we forgive, we acknowledge and accept the humanity of the other, even when their goodness is deeply buried. As we do, we experience God's goodness flowing through ourselves. We also experience our own capacity for goodness in a way that almost surprises us. Forgiveness is nothing less than an act of fidelity to an evil-combating campaign because forgiveness is one of God's ways of combating evil. We forgive to free ourselves, resisting the spiritual prisons of despair, vengeance, and chaos. We choose to live in the house of love.

We can and must ground ourselves experientially in the Compassionate One in order to forgive from the heart. It is helpful to remember when the harm done to us limits our empathic

imagination, that only God knows the whole story of those who do us harm. We can trust that God's heart grieves with us when we are harmed, and also trust that no matter how grieved God is for the harm we cause, She never loses sight of the divine within us. God is always turning harm into good. It's God's job.

Jesus' parable is addressing both the significance of our lives, and the compassion which undergirds all of reality. We grieve prophetically, healing ourselves and the world by looking to shape the larger forces that damaged the soul of the person who caused us harm. Even when we fight, we must keep our connection to love. God's compassion and passion for our wellbeing, and God's anguish when we are harmed and harm each other, is the wellspring of justice. In these troubled times we pray, may the Crucified and Risen Christ empower us to create a positive and equitable future, and to transcend harm as he did.

Mother, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

When we turn our attention and energy to stand against all that stands against compassion, we will keep our connection to love and the divine within us and all around us. People formed by such love are indestructible.

Amen