

13 Pentecost - Year A  
Genesis 50:15-21  
Romans 14:1-12  
Matthew 18:21-35

St. Andrew's, Fullerton  
September 11, 2011

## Forgiveness

I've been thinking about this sermon, talking with friends and colleagues, and wrestling with today's Gospel Lesson for more than a month and a half. So when I received via email a copy of today's bulletin, and read the *Prayers of the People: A Litany of Remembrance, Penitence, and Hope*, written especially for this day by the Rev. Eileen W. Lindner and the Rev. Marcel A. Welty of the National Council of Churches, I breathed a little easier, because these prayers put to words so much of the complexity of feelings I, and I suspect all of you, have regarding September 11, 2001 and today. These Prayers of the People, and the careful way in which those responsible here at St. Andrew's, Fullerton, put together this service, freed me up to be the preacher - which is to say, to wrestle with the Gospel Lesson and out of that engagement, try to make sense of what is being said about *forgiveness*. And I want to suggest, right off the bat, that forgiveness is less about discrete acts of forgiveness - i.e. I wrong you in some way, apologize to you, ask for forgiveness, and you forgive me - and more about a whole way of life - which is to say, are we living forgivingly? or perhaps more *unforgivingly*?

Today's Gospel Reading is what I call a *prickly parable*. Every single time I read it, even having studied it now numerous times, I end up feeling threatened and extremely uneasy. The lesson begins innocently enough with our good friend, the often-bumbling apostle Peter, coming up to Jesus and asking him a question about forgiveness. Jesus gives an answer which, appropriately, can be interpreted as meaning *Forgiving people isn't something about which we should keep count, or score. It's a whole way of life, of living. If you insist on counting, the answer is: 'an unlimited number of times'. But if you insist on counting, you're really missing the whole point of forgiveness*. Then Jesus tells a story, a parable, which does not directly illustrate the answer he's just given Peter. Rather, as we listen to the story, it seems to be heading in the direction of an invocation of the *Golden Rule*: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Only where it ends up is more like: do unto others as you would like to have *God* do unto you, because if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart, your heavenly Father will have you hauled off to jail and throw away the key.

Frankly, I think this is a terrible reading of the parable. If the only reason to forgive my neighbor is to save my own neck, to secure my own forgiveness, then it is not something I am doing out of love but out of fear, and does that sound like Jesus to you? It does not sound like Jesus to me, which makes me think that we have got to look below the surface to discover what this parable is about. How did the story start out so well and end up so poorly? What went wrong? What made the servant so wicked, so unable to forgive a mere fraction of the debt he himself had just been forgiven?

There's an element of this parable that reminds me of a part of Victor Hugo's epic novel, *Les Miserables*. You may be familiar with some of the story - but I'll bet not all of it. Hugo begins the entire book with the description of Bishop Myriel, a seventy-five-year-old man who has served the diocese as bishop for nine years. He is a man of kindness and charity, widely admired by all the people for his saintly conduct and modest way of life. One of the tenets of his

life is that prejudice and vice are the real sources of evil and that "the great dangers are within us". He warns people that "we should fear ourselves".

The main character in the book - Jean Valjean - is freed after nineteen years as a galley slave for stealing a loaf of bread. He comes to the town in which Bishop Myriel resides, and no one will put him up for the night or give him any food out of fear. He finally comes to the Bishop's house for help - and Bishop Myriel receives him warmly, has dinner served to the former convict, and personally shows Jean Valjean a comfortable bedroom. However, Valjean is tempted by the sight of the bishop's silverware and escapes with it during the night. He is swiftly apprehended and brought before the bishop, who states that the silverware was a gift to Valjean and that he should also take the two candlesticks. The police leave, and alone with Valjean, Bishop Myriel tells him that he wants Jean to use the silver to become an honest man. In a speech that will haunt Jean the rest of his life, the saintly old man says this: "Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God."

That's dramatic enough; but here's the part of the story that we may have forgotten. Jean Valjean leaves the bishop's home completely forgiven, free to begin a new life. But almost the very next thing that happens is that he encounters a boy with a coin and he puts his foot upon the money when it rolls near him. Rejecting the youngster's pleading, Jean keeps the coin. It is only then - when the child has gone away - that remorse overcomes him. He seeks out the child and cannot find him. So he goes back to the bishop's house, kneels in the street outside the front door, and weeps bitterly that he cannot return the money. Now, finally, he begins his life anew.

What made me think of this part of *Les Miserables* was that both the slave in our Gospel Lesson and Jean Valjean are *completely* forgiven *impossible* debts - yet, for some reason, at first, *they are not able to experience themselves as truly forgiven*. And what is illustrated as a consequence of their inability to experience themselves as truly forgiven, is that they are unable to "go and do likewise".

Now, there is a principle here that we need to recognize and honor, and it comes from today's psalm. Psalm 103 beginning at Verse 8 reads: *The LORD is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. He will not always accuse us, nor will he keep his anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our wickedness. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.* In Christian life, *we start out forgiven!* We are born *indebted*. None of us did anything to earn or deserve our very lives, which are given as gift - free gift - by God. We are impossibly indebted right from the beginning of our lives. Add to that picture original sin - no small concept, to be sure - and we, in the Christian Tradition have understood ourselves, specifically through the death and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ, as *starting out forgiven*. So the question becomes, What gets in the way of our experiencing our own state of forgiveness? which then, according to the parable, results in our inability to forgive others?

I don't know the answer to this question for sure - but I do have a suggestion that I want to offer. I think that one reason we so frequently are unable to experience ourselves as forgiven is because it's *easier*, it's *much more comfortable*, in fact, to start in a place of original sin than to start in a place of original forgiveness. It's easier for us simply to say: "I'm not good enough" or "I'm not worthy to do this", than it is to say: "I am a completely forgiven sinner, a child of God, who, having experienced the complete and thorough *grace* that my own life is, right from the start, now am called upon to share the profound love of God from which God's grace came, and be forgiving of others, so as to continue the work of "reconciling the world" to God, that was begun in Christ Jesus."

That is, as best I can say it, what real forgiveness is about. Real forgiveness is pure, unadulterated grace. I don't deserve it. I didn't earn it. And I may even have done something so despicable as to have God, or another person, have second thoughts about offering it. Yet they do. All I have ever been able to do is *ask* for forgiveness. When it has been granted, it has come from outside myself, a free gift from someone I have hurt - whom I have owed - but who has decided that what is more important than getting even is staying in relationship with me.

That, too, is an important part of forgiveness: *relationship*. So much of what passes for forgiveness today subtly and sometimes not so subtly shirks the hard work of relating to one another. People overlook one another's faults or make excuses for them and call it forgiveness. They hide their feelings in order to avoid a fight and call it forgiveness. They learn how to say things that sound forgiving and call it forgiveness, while their actions bear no resemblance to their words. Much of what passes for forgiveness these days is really a kind of indifference, in which we dismiss people from our lives by "forgiving" them and then have less and less to do with them until finally there is nothing left between us at all. Have we forgotten, ourselves, what it's like to be forgiven? That's what the king in the parable wants to know from the slave whom he so recently forgave. "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"

All I can figure is that the slave missed the significance of what had happened to him. He simply figured he had gotten away with something the old king was too stupid to realize. After all, he could *never* repay what he owed. He knew it. The king knew it. But if making the king feel sorry for him meant he did not have to pay, then what did he care? It never occurred to him that he was not being let off the hook, or being patronized by a sentimental old monarch. It never crossed his mind that what was really happening to him was that he was being forgiven from the heart by someone who understood the enormity of his debt - indeed, by someone who had financed it - but who was willing to let it all go, to stop keeping score, to erase the debt that had become a substitute for the relationship so that they could get to know one another again.

The only reason for us ever to forgive each other is because we want the relationship back again, which is hard to do when you're keeping score. As long as we are focused on what somebody else owes us, we tend to spend our time figuring out how to get paid back, or proved right, or protected from further harm. But once we have forgiven our sister or our brother from the heart - there is all the time in the world: time to put the calculator away and go for a walk, time to compare notes on what we have learned, time to get to know one another again.

Which brings us back to Peter and Peter's original question about forgiveness. Jesus tells Peter: "It's not something you measure." and then tells him a story. By the end of the parable, we may think we have gotten the message: do unto others, or the king will do unto you. Only that is not the message at all. The message of the parable is: "Do unto others as the king has *already* done unto you." It's not a matter of earning forgiveness, or letting others off the hook so that we will be let off the hook, too. It's a matter of understanding that we have *already* been forgiven! Jesus tells the parable to illustrate how easy it is to become vindictive ourselves when we do not understand that God forgives us right from the very beginning of our lives! *We start* forgiven. And once we have taken that in - once we have really let it sink in - the profound *love* from which that kind of forgiveness emanates - then how can we ever pass up the chance to offer the same?

The Rt. Rev. Mary D. Glasspool