

Year A Proper 24, Forgiveness is Not Easy, Matthew 18:21-35

Baptism is more than just a ceremony. It's arguably the most important event in our lives and most of us don't remember it. Baptism signifies that we have chosen to enter into life with Christ as a new creation. If we align our wants with what God wants – that is, that every person be in a loving relationship with God and with each other, at the same time caring for the world and its creatures – then we will be a part of God's kingdom in a redeemed world.

Forgiveness is one of the big things that defines us as baptized members of Christ's body who have chosen to live in Jesus Christ. We have chosen to worship, to align our lives with, a God who forgives and, in the words we hear him speak today, he tells us that God expects us to do the same. Forgiveness can be an extremely difficult task and yet we are called to do exactly that over and over.

You may remember that one August, several years ago (2017) – there was a disgusting display of white supremacists and other hate groups in Charlottesville, Virginia. One young woman died when a Neo-Nazi deliberately plowed his car into a crowded intersection. Her father was interviewed that same day and he said, "That young man is stupid but, I forgive him". I was amazed that he was able to forgive the murderer of his daughter so quickly. He made it clear that forgiveness has nothing to do with saying it was okay – forgiveness does not in any way mean the wrong is acceptable – he said the young man was "stupid" but forgave him anyway.

That interview made me think of my mother. Just days after my 17th birthday, my older brother – 18 at the time – was shot and killed by a local police officer. It's a long story...it was a practical joke gone wrong; my brother shouldn't have ended up dead. I bring it up because of what it did to my mother. She was consumed by hate for the cop who killed her son. Every evening, she sat in her living room chair, afraid to go to sleep. She knew that, in the quiet of the night, there was nothing to stop the bad dreams and murderous thoughts of revenge on that police officer. She shut God out. Actually, she'd let him in long enough to yell at him and then shut him back out again.

Forgiveness can be hard...and in some ways, society makes it even harder. Sometimes revenge is disguised as getting justice. My mum told me that shady people from the world of organized crime contacted her and offered, for a fee, to get rid of that police officer for her. On the legal side, lawyers called her up, encouraging her to sue the police officer and the police department. We live in a society that wants to lay blame and, somehow, that's supposed to make us feel better.

There's a segment of our society that strongly believes that revenge is justice – if someone hurts you, hurt them back; and there's a segment who believe that suing is justice. Restitution is necessary but the restitution needs to fit the wrong doing. Perhaps my mother would have

felt some temporary satisfaction from getting money out of that cop and police department but it wouldn't have lasted. Money has no healing power although it can be used to do good things.

Because we are baptized into life with Christ, we know that we're not meant to think the way the rest of society thinks. We learned last week that Jesus wants us to hold onto the sinners, the ones who hurt us, and try to turn them back to God. If we don't succeed, we are to continue to love them anyway and trust in our prayers and the power of the Holy Spirit that was renewed within each one of us at our baptism.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God is able to take the badness of human sin and work it into the goodness of his plan for our salvation. We saw it in the story of Joseph. God took the malicious actions of Joseph's brothers and used them to make Joseph an important figure in Egypt. The Old Testament is full of examples like this – of God working with sin, taking human imperfection, and using it for good. I saw this up close and personal when God's voice of love overpowered my mum's hate-filled voice of revenge. God called her into his service – she became a Lay Reader in her church, went back to high school and got her diploma, went to university, and was ordained as a priest. Now she practices – and preaches – forgiveness.

As Christians, our most important, life-changing, awe-inspiring example of God taking sin and working it into his plan for salvation is, of course, the death of Jesus on the cross. God took the murder of his only son and turned it into the vehicle for our redemption and for the redemption of the whole world.

None of these examples are meant to say that God wants or needs bad things to happen. Not at all. God does not want sin. These examples simply show us that the saving power of God's grace and love can overcome the evil and darkness of sin...if we let it.

Forgiveness is a choice...a choice God will nudge us toward but a choice nonetheless. The story Jesus told us today makes it abundantly clear that our ability to forgive is crucial to our own salvation – the unforgiving servant is handed over to be tortured until he can pay his debt. That was his choice because after he was forgiven, he did not forgive the smaller debt of his fellow servant.

Why is it so important to forgive? Forgiveness allows us to move on – to grow and to flourish – to not let the past keep us from thriving in the present. Forgiveness allows us to let go of anger, hate, bitterness, resentment, and keeps us right with God. Jesus tells us that all of God's laws are summed up in the two great commandments – to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbours as ourselves. We can't love the neighbour we haven't forgiven. You'll notice that the commandment doesn't say the neighbour is going to love us. Forgiveness is a personal and private thing between us and God – the person or people who hurt us don't even need to

be there; don't need to hear us say we forgive them. There have been wonderful stories of offenders changing their lives for the better when their victims or victims' families have expressed their forgiveness but that is not a necessary part of forgiveness because forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing. Forgiveness is the first step – between us and God – in our personal healing journey.

Forgiveness doesn't wash away bad memories. When we think of wrongs that have been done to us, that can bring all sorts of negative emotions flooding back that we need to push away again and again. Forgiveness is hard and forgiveness can take a long time and forgiveness can be an ongoing struggle. The familiar words of the Lord's Prayer can help – "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" – but most times, forgiveness takes a lot more work and a lot more prayer than that. My mum said to me, many years after my brother's murder, that she no longer wishes harm on that police officer. That's a big step in the right direction for her but she still prays constantly for God to help her push the negative thoughts away.

Forgiveness is hard and, as I've said, society can make it even harder when loud voices call for us to assign blame, take revenge, punish the wrongdoer...but, on top of this, forgiveness can be hard when the wrongdoer doesn't deserve forgiveness.

This takes us back to the story we heard Jesus tell us today. The king's slave owed the king millions of dollars which amounted to the slave's wages for the next 150 years. In other words, there was absolutely no way the slave was going to be able to pay back that amount to the king and yet the king forgave him the debt anyway. That slave must have horribly managed the king's money in order to be that much in debt and likely didn't deserve to have the king wipe his slate clean. Paul tells us that we are all sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God. We don't deserve God's forgiveness; we can never earn God's forgiveness...but he gives it to us anyway.

As Jesus hung on the cross, with his dying breath, he said, "Father, forgive them." He didn't say, "I forgive you." In his agony he prayed for us. In that moment Jesus was both the one and only perfect sacrifice and the one and only perfect high priest praying to God on our behalf; forever granting access to the gift of God's grace and love and forgiveness.

Jesus' short life of work, along with his redemptive death and resurrection, launched God's kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven. As his saved people, marked as Christ's own at our baptism, we continue his work in drawing the kingdom ever closer. We do this through love and, as hard as it is, that requires forgiveness. Each time we forgive, we reveal God's kingdom to the people around us. Each time we forgive, we radiate the gift of God's love – ours to claim through our baptism and shown to us so poignantly in the passionate words that our Lord Jesus Christ breathed from the cross..."Father, forgive them."

