

September 17, 2017
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 19, Year A, RCL
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Exodus 14:19-31
Psalm 114
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Most Sundays in church we do a ritual of corporate confession in which we request and are assured of God's forgiveness. That emphasis on confession may be well and good, but the Gospels seem to place the emphasis elsewhere. I hear the Gospels as saying less about *seeking* forgiveness, and more about *offering* forgiveness. The Gospels portray Jesus teaching by word: he tells his disciples to forgive. They portray Jesus teaching by example: he does a lot of forgiving, without people even asking for it. This emphasis is more in line with our lived reality: it is easy to *seek* forgiveness from God, but it's hard to *offer* forgiveness to others. Unfortunately, the church gives us lots of help with the *seeking*, but not so much with the *offering*.

Though we get little help, we know we're *supposed* to forgive. "Perfect forgiveness" is just one among the nearly impossible standards that Christians are expected to attain. "The church" holds us to those standards; non-Christians hold us to them. Much of the time, we fall short.

The biggest "Christian" news stories usually hail from the sensationally extreme ends of the Christian behavioral spectrum. Thus we hear about events that are either super-awful or super-wonderful, even though that's not where regular Christians usually reside. Remember the 2015 shootings at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina? That story encompassed both ends of the spectrum, shooter at one end and victims on the other. It was all over the news when some family members of the victims immediately "forgave" the perpetrator.

After a time, a few news outlets returned to the story in Charleston. Despite the original reports, it turned out that not everyone was so quick to forgive, and no one could possibly forget.¹ This raises a number of questions: Is it necessary or even possible to forgive someone who is not repentant? What is the relationship between forgiveness and punishment? Can forgiveness ever require a person to endure additional harm?

The bulk of today's Gospel reading is a parable—a fictional story intended to drive home an instructional point. With master, slave, and torture, this particular parable employs strong metaphor. Jesus—or Matthew—must have a reason for that. Maybe it's because the point here is particularly important. Or maybe it's because compliance is particularly difficult; after all, as Peter's question suggests, it's hard to forgive once, much less seven times, much less *seventy-seven* times.

Peter mentions *sin*, but in the parable, the object of debt and forgiveness is *wealth*. Literally and metaphorically, there are many Gospel passages in which Jesus speaks of money. The most cited one must be Matthew's passage in which Jesus teaches the disciples what became the Lord's Prayer. We recite the Lord's Prayer with the words, "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Using the contemporary language of the Lord's Prayer, we would say, "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

The Lord's Prayer may use trespass and sin, but the source passage in Matthew is actually this: "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."² We hear again the inference of wealth—wealth as money or property—wealth as something concrete. Pairing *debt* with *forgiveness* makes sense: here and in the parable, the Greek word translated as *forgiveness* is generally used to describe the remission of a debt.

That being said, when I think of the word *forgiveness*, what comes to mind is a transaction involving something much more complicated than cash. In that transaction, one party has suffered physical, spiritual, or emotional harm. This type of harm is impossible to quantify. When that's the case, forgiveness is a much more difficult undertaking.

There's been a lot written about the power of forgiveness. Yes, forgiveness can be a necessary aspect of healing. But the expectation that at some point a switch will be flipped and everything will be fine ... that's unrealistic. I think this is related to our cultural need for some sort of magical "closure." I don't think it works that way. Seldom does a person's psychological, emotional, or spiritual life follow such direct lines. Some scars never really heal.

Let's take another look at today's parable. Note that the master revoked his forgiveness because of the slave's *lack* of forgiveness. We tend to assume that the master is God. If so, the parable infers that God's forgiveness is conditional: God forgives us only if we forgive others. That's a tough prospect. But what if instead the master one of us? In that case the parable infers that the forgiveness *we* offer can be conditional. It infers that the forgiven party can be held to some reasonable expectations of accountability.

I want to hone in here on one thing, and that's the place of the church in all this. Through confession, the church offers transgressors the opportunity for reconciliation with God and the community. But nothing the church is short on resources for those who have been harmed. On some level we know we're supposed to forgive, but the church offers little help in getting there. Even worse, the church views our lack of forgiveness as at best a failure and at worst a sin. And even worse than *that*, sometimes the church itself is the transgressing party.

Directly and indirectly, the church and its leaders have committed harm against people inside and outside their church communities. Clergy child abuse is only the most appalling tip of a very large iceberg. That those most directly affected are pressured to forgive—and even to forget—is the harmful icing on the harmful cake.

A large number of you have been harmed by "the church." By this I mean the messages and leadership of your past Christian communities. I hear some of your stories and am amazed that you can even walk in the door. As for myself, I feel fairly certain that, had Christian messaging been different, I would have come out at age 12 instead of age 30. As it happened, I was a 30-year-old unchurched agnostic. And still I was scared and wondering whether God would strike me down in a flash of lightning. Fast-forward 25 years, and here I am—not just out, not just a Christian, but also a representative of "the church." As a representative of the church, it is my responsibility to continue the work necessary to change the church.

At yesterday's Pride event in New Haven, a group of clergy held a service of song, readings, and prayers. It was intended to be mostly festive. But my colleague Pastor Jack of Spring Glen Congregational Church suggested that the clergy offer some words of repentance. The litany that he and I offered included this bidding: "We regret the centuries of harm committed by religious communities and their representatives against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, genderqueer, and other queer-identified people. Guide all faith leaders and congregations who seek the reconciliation necessary to create a new narrative." We are part of that new narrative.

Let's circle back to debt and forgiveness. Though the harms we seek to remedy aren't monetary, it might be helpful to think of them that way. Imagine transgressions as debts owed one to another, and maybe you'll have something more concrete to hold on to. Some debts simply will never be repaid, no matter how much you spend on collection. Sometimes it's better to accept and grieve the loss, tear up the I.O.U., and write off the asset.

Let's return to the Greek word that we translate as *forgiveness*. It's used for the remission of a debt, as well as for the more general act of letting go or of walking away. This is a good point at which to remember that walking away from something old is also walking toward something new.

When it comes to the church, maybe you've walked away and toward, and maybe that's how you ended up here. I know that's how I ended up here. God reminded me that God is God, and that the church and its leaders are not God, even if those leaders would have you think it. My hope is that this church continues to grow as a place where harms can be healed, and where all people can build a relationship with God that transcends any limitations placed by human interference.

I will close with another bidding from yesterday's litany. Let us pray. God, Holy One, source of life and fountain of wellbeing, fill all of us gathered here with hope and joy. Make our diversity of bodies symbols of your unlimited possibility. Embolden us to take our celebration far beyond this place, and help us help others to find the way of love. Amen.

Notes

¹ David von Drehle, "How do you Forgive," Time Magazine, November 23, 2015, available online at <http://time.com/time-magazine-charleston-shooting-cover-story/> (accessed September 16, 2017).

² Matthew 6:12, NRSV.