

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY
Second Sunday After Pentecost - June 13, 2004
Anne G. Cohen

Luke 7:36-8:3

For Our Reflection:

Allah, Most High, says: He who approaches near to me one span, I will approach to him one cubit; and he who approaches near to me one cubit, I will approach near to him one fathom; and whoever approaches me walking, I will come to him running, and he who meets me with sins equivalent to the whole world, I will greet him with forgiveness equal to it.

- Mishkat-ul-Masabih, 7th century

We witness... by being a community of reconciliation, a forgiving community of the forgiven.

- Bishop Desmond Tutu, Crying in the Wilderness c. 1982

I've learned that when you have an argument with your spouse, the first one who says, "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings; please forgive me," is the winner. – age 51

- From Live and Learn and Pass It On, compiled by H. Jackson Brown, Jr. p.66

Forgiveness is a Discipline

It took me five years to forgive my first husband for the emotional damage that I believed (at the time) he inflicted upon me. I remember the moment – in the car, 210 westbound just before the Tujunga/Lowell exit. It was as if a storm had passed through – FINALLY – and I could move on safely. I no longer had to carry the hurt and anger with me into my future.

That moment did not come out of nowhere. It came out of somewhat inarticulate, internal struggling on my part over those five years - and several years before that. I had to come to terms with the fact that he was not going to work on "our issues" with me – and whatever "issues" I worked on would need to be for me, not for "us." I also had to admit to myself how much of the damage was self-inflicted – and how much damage was done to him BY me – out of my own lack of self-understanding and my own desire to hurt back.

The process of forgiving Joe was simultaneous with the process of forgiving myself – and God. That process has continued my whole life, in every relationship, revealing itself to be a DISCIPLINE.

It is a Life Long Discipline that I am forced to practice every day – because I am a naturally judgmental creature – and because I would rather live my life in a creative, loving and happy atmosphere.

In some ways it is more difficult to practice the discipline of forgiveness in political life, especially in the context of damage done to others rather than damage done to me personally. But neither context is easy. And the same skills are called for in varying potencies.

We Christians love to think that we invented forgiveness and that our forgiveness of each other is to act in the image of God. (I've said that exact thing numerous times.) But, much to my chagrin, I've discovered that we are not God – nor are we gods. And we will do well to recognize the difference in our discipline.

Robert Schreiter, a Roman Catholic seminary professor, author of The Ministry of Reconciliation, believes that God does not forgive simply because God is all powerful – but because God is capable of infinite love. Forgiveness from God overcomes ANY offense and leads us into closer union or communion with the Divine. (p.57)

He also believes that we humans have a different motivation – and must – because we are not capable of infinite love. Even Mother Teresa had her bad days. Humans forgiving one another is “about not being controlled by the past.” Schreiter calls it “an act of freedom” and says it “involves both a process and a decision.” (p.57)

One cannot simply WILL to be free of a traumatic past; one must go through the difficult task of acknowledging the wounds and working through the memory that keeps those wounds present to us.

It involves telling and retelling the story of the event and coming to an understanding of the impact of that event. And “even if the process of coming free from the power of the past is achieved, it still takes a conscious decision to forgive.” To do this there must be some level of “healing of a damaged humanity. The victim no longer reacts passively to events, but is able to steer a course through them and even beyond them.” (p.58)

An important point that Schreiter makes is that a decision to forgive ...is a commitment to WORK to achieve a different kind of future... forgiveness is really NOT about the deed that caused the trauma. It is about the RELATIONSHIP the victim has to the deed's ongoing effects... The decision to forgive is the RITUAL ACT that proclaims the freedom of the survivor to have a different future. (pp.58-59)

He goes on to describe the power of forgiveness as being a different form of power than the power to do harm to another. The power to forgive derives FROM God – OUR Source of infinite Love. Part of our discipline might then be to constantly and consciously root ourselves in God. Seeking union and communion with our Maker is a tool for expanding our limited capacity for forgiveness.

The Rabbi Lawrence Kushner (The Book of Words pp.79-81) points out that according to Torah and other rabbinical writings, “there is only one way to let go of a grudge. ‘You must tell someone when they have hurt you.’” The point of telling them is not vengeance or humiliation – so the manner of telling is important. The point is to avoid doing damage in response.

The Hebrew word for “grudge” (n'tee-rah') Kushner has translated as “poison.” And he believes that grudges “are things we deliberately choose to haul around” that poison our lives.

Each grudge takes on a life of its own. Like a parasite, living in our past, demanding ever increasing amounts of unconscious attention, it feeds on our vitality. With each passing week, month, year, even though we may have lost all but a fleeting awareness of our hurt, the grudge becomes more and more important.

And as the grudge anchors us to something long gone, it denies a part of us from being here in the present. It requires more and more psychic energy. It burrows deep into our personality, sapping our joy and our happiness. Often we do not even know it is there, until we try to feel joy. A grudge can be detected in the extra muscular effort required to produce a smile.

Take a moment and think about someone who has hurt you in some way – large or small. Is there someone – the thought of whom would give you pleasure if they got a ticket - or got their heart broken just a little - or dented their SUV - or lost a small body part or a contract at work? Can you think of someone you would like to see experience just the tiniest bit of suffering?

If so – like me – you are holding a grudge. And it is up to each one of us to practice the discipline of forgiveness, unhooking ourselves from the past, choosing a new future.

It is an empowering discipline – a discipline I would urge our current Administration to practice – a discipline I have seen most clearly practiced by a Quaker woman I roomed with at my Interim Ministry training. She had been assaulted in her home, bound and raped repeatedly for hours. She nearly lost the use of her hands and feet from the loss of circulation. And yet, her desire to purge the poison of her anger and fear was stronger than the poison itself.

She installed an alarm system and has a network of friends who watch over her safety. But she has embodied a lightness of being which comes with a discipline of forgiveness – practiced every day of her life. We offered communion together the last day of the training – Quaker communion which is done with song rather than bread. And it was unmistakably Communion with God.

Buddha was once threatened with death by a bandit called Angulimal.
“Then be good enough to fulfill my dying wish,” said Buddha. “Cut off the branch of that tree.”
One slash of the sword, and it was done! “What now?” asked the bandit.
“Put it back again,” said Buddha.
The bandit laughed. “You must be crazy to think that anyone can do that.”
“On the contrary, it is you who are crazy to think that you are mighty because you can wound and destroy. That is the task of children. The mighty know how to create and heal.”

-Anthony de Mello, The Heart of the Enlightened, from Spiritual Literacy, Brussat p.277

Bulletin

WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship – A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship (unison) (from Galla, Ethiopia)

O God, you have prepared in peace the path I must follow today.

Help me to walk straight on that path.

If I speak, remove lies from my lips.

If I am hungry, take away from me all complaint.
If I have plenty, destroy pride in me.
May I go through the day calling on you,
you, O God, who know no other God.

+ Opening Hymn

Morning Has Broken

CSB # 74

+ Opening Prayer (unison) (from Cape Town, So. Africa)

O God whose Son in anger drove the money-changers from the temple
let the anger of the detainees be to the cleansing of this land.
O God I hold before you the anger, the rage, the frustration, the sorrow
of all black mothers who demand for their children
the same chance to grow up strong and tall, loving and unafraid
as any white mother wants for her children.
In penitence I offer you my own mixed-up anger that it, with theirs
may be taken up into your redemptive will
in which the clash between anger and fear, oppressed and oppressor
can give way to the incomprehensible action of agape-love
bringing about the reconciliation,
the embrace of the other, the alien, the enemy,
creating the festival of shalom in which the wolf shall lie down with the lamb
and the whole of life on earth shall rejoice in the splendor of your glory.

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)

Creator God who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the kingdom and the power
And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection (you may be seated)

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

God creates the festival of shalom.
And the whole of life on earth rejoices
in the splendor of God's glory!

Sung Response "Hallelujah... God be praised!" (CSB #5 Refrain)

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

The Just Peace Reflection was introduced to our worship service by our Just Peace Committee.

It is a weekly reminder of the need for social justice in order to create a peaceful world.

Just Peace Reflection

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Scriptures

Luke 7:36-8:3

Sermon

Forgiveness is a Discipline

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer *Be still and know that I am God*

Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response

In Solitude

Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Offering Prayer (unison)

All that God is and all that God has, God gives;

All that we are, and all that we have, God asks. Amen.

+ Sending Hymn

We Are Not Our Own

Hymnal # 564

+ Commissioning (unison)

We are reconciled to the patience and persistence that make peace;

to the transparency and fairness that make justice;

to the forgiveness and restitution that build harmony;

to the love and reconstruction which banish poverty and discrimination;

to the experience of knowing one another

that makes it possible to enjoy one another;

to the spiritual strength of the one God

who made us of one flesh and blood, and loves us.

Let us share the peace together.

+ Sung Response

Hymnal #458

I've got a feeling everything is gonna be all right.

O I've got a feeling everything is gonna be all right.

O I've got a feeling everything is gonna be all right,

be all right, be all right, be all right.

+ Postlude

WORSHIP NOTES

Call to Worship (from Galla, Ethiopia) is found in An African Prayer Book, Ed. by Desmond Tutu, c. 1995, p.117

Opening Prayer (from Cape Town, So. Africa) is by Dr. Margaret Nash, a prominent Anglican layperson in Cape Town. She joined black workers in resisting the bulldozing of their shacks, which had been declared illegal under apartheid laws. Thousands of young people were jailed

without trial laws during the apartheid era – these are the detainees referred to in the prayer. Ibid.
pp.43-44 (adapted)

Offering Prayer is by St. Augustine, Ibid. p. 116

Commissioning is from the South Africa, National Service of Thanksgiving, May 8, 1994, Ibid.
pp.38-40