

13 September 2020

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness is a tricky subject. We all know we *should* be a forgiving people. But it's hard to forgive people who hurt us, especially those who do it again and again. I always think it's important to remember that forgiving someone doesn't mean that what he or she did is ok—just that it's not going to get in the way of wishing them well, healing even, and that you're not going to hold on to it so that it eats your up. Lily Tomlin said that withholding forgiveness is like eating rat poison hoping the rat will die. I don't know what granting forgiveness is like in this analogy. Maybe keeping your home safe from the rat but being content to let the rat be, in the hopes of it becoming a better rat.

The different between Peter and Jesus seems to be that **Peter sees forgiving his brother a real chore**, a burden. How many times do I HAVE TO forgive? **For Jesus, forgiving is a way of life.** Their conversation reminds me of a story from the desert fathers tradition where a monk goes to his abbot and says *“Holy Father, as I am able I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and, according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of firs. He said, Why not become fire?”* I hear that as saying, **Why not become so excited about loving like God loves that we stop being calculating and simply love as God loves.**

The parable Jesus tells about the forgiven but then unforgiving man suggests to strategies to learn in order to love more like God loves. 1. Take to heart God's mercy for you, God's blessing and unconditional love. You might just pass it on. I grew up with this song in church: *“It only takes a spark to get a fire glowing. And soon all those around can warm up in its glowing. That's how it is with God's love, once you experience it. You'll spread his love, to everyone. You'll want to pass it on!”*

Except, that's not the way it worked for this fellow in the story. He was unmoved apparently for the mercy shown to him; nothing sparked in his soul. It can be like that with us, too. It is so easy to get self-absorbed so that we have neither awareness of God's love for us nor compassion for others. **Compassion and mercy for others is the second ingredient in being more able to love as God loves.**

I was biking up the hill on the downtown side of the river up to the high bridge. Almost to the bridge, I was straining at the pedals when a car pulled up toward the road from a parking lot on my left, wanting to turn left in front of me. He eyeballed me and indeed turned right in front of me. He didn't brush me or anything, but I think 99 out of 100 drivers would have waited for me to pass. Then, just at the bridge, I heard someone lay on the horn where that car would have been. Apparently he had made another inconsiderate move. So, of course my first reaction was to judge him as a jerk, and usually I stop there. But I had the grace that day to recall that I am often totally self-absorbed on the road, perhaps in a hurry, or perhaps in a bad mood or whatever. What I realized was that he could have been me; I've been like that. I could see myself in the jerk, and I stopped judging and sought mercy for both of us.

The unforgiving servant could not see himself in the servant below him that owed him money, even though he used the very same words in begging for mercy that had worked for him earlier with the king.

So, those are two dangers to avoid, the patterns of behavior to be vigilant about falling into: being insensitive to the love and mercy of God all around you and being unable to see yourself in your brother. Knowing the mercy of God and seeing ourselves in our brother, however, will make us burn like fire.

P.S. Our need to forgive others is so often tied together in the Scriptures with God forgiving us. It was in the first reading today that “If you forgive your brother his sins, then God will forgive you yours.” In Matthew’s Gospel account, after the Lord’s Prayer, which includes “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” the next line is **“If you forgive your brother then your heavenly Father will forgive you, but if you don’t forgive your brother, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you.”** Yikes! That’s doesn’t sound like the unconditional love I’ve come to understand and lean on daily! What’s going on? **I make sense of this by thinking that while God is always loving us and extending mercy, if we do not extend it to others, then this divine power within us dries us.** So “Pass it on!” --it’s good for those you love and also for you.