

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time A (Sept. 13, 2020-STM)

Carol Howard Merritt writes this: ("Living by the Word," *The Christian Century*, October 20, 2015.)

I was by my father's hospice bed, the contraption that had made way for home nurses, oxygen tanks and comforting opiates. ... Dad had been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. When I read up on this diagnosis, it was comforting to label his tortured soul and fear of abandonment, as if a handful of syllables could suddenly contain years of confusing emotions. Though most people with BPD are not violent, my father was, so my formative years were tumultuous.

I did my best to make peace with him. "The beauty of death," my aunt told me, "is that forgiveness is final." I held his hand, looking forward to that finality. ...

I prayed over my dad, asking God to lead him to green pastures and beside still waters. I reminded him that nothing would separate him from God's love, and I was comforted by the thought that death might finally close the lonely abyss that haunted his mind. But he died when I left, without speaking to me again, and it didn't seem fair. ...

Later I realized I had not forgiven my father. It was when I read this passage [John 11:32-44-*the raising of Lazarus from the dead* Italics mine] and heard Jesus thundering, "Unbind him, and let him go." The words echoed through me. My resentments had bound me to my father, even in his death. I had been afraid that without them, there would be nothing left of our relationship -- nothing there to bind us. So I had secretly nursed discontent and unforgiveness. But then I heard that command of Jesus, booming through generations until it called up death itself: Unbind him.

So I unfurled the linen pieces and peeled off the bandages. I gave the wounds air to breathe. I unbound him from my bitterness and acidity. As I let each piece go, I learned that love remains.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus, last week I spoke to you about conflict. Today we are going to speak about forgiveness. Peter presents a question to Jesus: how often must I forgive? The translation we hear today is "seventy-seven times." The more accurate translation is "seventy times seven." *It is important because the preamble to the parable is that the Christian Community life is based upon the perfection of the perfect seven-day Creation in Genesis. Hence Jesus refers to the cycle of the perfect seven-day creation another seventy times. In other words, we must be ready to forgive our neighbor every single time there is a trespass against us., because in such total forgiveness thee community is brought into right relationship with God and with each other. This is a restoration of Genesis. Jesus ushers in this new kingdom, this new teaching. This kingdom is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. (adapted from Charles Bobertz)*

This is a lofty task...forgiveness of those who have hurt us in some way. We can become very bound up in with the wounds of our life. We can become somewhat dead in a sense. We can be void of life within us due to a grudge, resentment, anger, hostility. We can let these things control us and rob us of life. Jesus knew this. Why do you think he talked about forgiveness so much? It is a real part and a real problem of the human condition.

The parable that we hear shows how one servant's debt is forgiven but that same person fails to forgive the debt of another. It all leads up to the what the master will do. The master is enraged by the conduct of the evil servant toward his fellow servant. He hands him over to tortures until he can pay back every last cent which is not likely to ever happen.

Matthew places great demands on his listeners. The demand of forgiveness is perhaps the hardest. However, in all of this, what we must remember is the mercy God has shown toward us. In the end, that is what we all want and desire. We want mercy. We want to know that God is merciful and will grant us the forgiveness that we seek of our offenses. And our job is to do the same. To forgive others their trespasses. And forgiving is not forgetting. Timothy Merrill says this:

*Forgiveness is not saying "Forget it." Forgiveness is not saying "I forget."  
Forgiveness is not saying "It's okay." Rather, forgiveness is saying "I'm okay, and I am willing to let God deal with whether you are okay, and I am also willing to let go of my need to be the tool of correction and rebuke in your life." ...Forgiveness is not saying "I no longer feel the pain." Rather, forgiveness is saying "I no longer feel the need to hold on to your involvement in my pain." --Timothy Merrill, Learning to Fall: A Guide for the Spiritually Clumsy, timothymerrill.net. 106ff. Kindle loc. 2246ff.*

How do we do all of this? There has to be a first step. We have to pray for the desire to want to forgive the person whom we swore we would never forgive. God can work with seemingly impossible cases like us humans so do not think that this is something that is beyond what God can do.

Once you have taken that first step, then you need to muster the courage to actually say the words "I forgive you" or write them down. It can be really, really hard especially when the wound is very deep. But there is some freedom in that. We can be unbound through offering forgiveness.

When we think about it, we probably have a lot of chance for forgiveness in our lives and that can begin in our own family. Anne Lamott humorously writes about this saying:

*Families: hard, hard, hard, no matter how cherished and astonishing they may also be .... At family gatherings where you suddenly feel homicidal or suicidal, remember that in half of all cases, it's a miracle that this annoying person even lived. Earth is Forgiveness School. You might as well start at the dinner table. That way, you can do this work in comfortable pants. When [William] Blake said that we are here to learn to endure the beams of love, he knew that your family would be an intimate part of this, even as you want to run screaming for your cute little life. But that you are up to it. You can do it, Cinderellie. You will be amazed.  
--Anne Lamott. salon.com. Retrieved April 4, 2017.*

Whether it is someone at your nightly dinner table, or someone in your extended family or someone who was a friend and you no longer consider that person to be, I want you to take some time today as the gifts are prepared to bring that person to mind. Who is that person you need to forgive for your benefit and for that person's benefit? Offer this Mass, this Eucharist act of love, for that person. That could be your first step. That could be the grace that you need to get going in this forgiveness thing. Remember, here we celebrate how God has loved

us and forgiven us and this is where we hope for eternal forgiveness. This is grace, scandalous grace. It is a grace that operates above justice and the law, beyond revenge and retaliation. But it is grace and forgiveness that offer the only way out the vicious and violent cycle of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” When we are tempted to seek an eye or an eye, we must remember the scandalous grace of forgiveness that we have received from God and we must in turn seek to offer that to others. We must simply let it go. We must be unbound and then, only love will remain. Amen.