

Presence and Forgiveness

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Exodus 14:19-31; Matthew 18:21-35

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

September 13, 2020

When we talk about forgiveness, we find ourselves at or near the demanding and gracious center of the Christian faith. Doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God – all of these are shaped by the life of forgiveness. Richard Rohr has said that 2/3 of the teachings of Jesus – either directly or indirectly – are about forgiveness. If that is true, then it means that most of our work has to do, in some way, with forgiveness. And when we talk about forgiveness, we can also find ourselves talking about *hard-heartedness*. Because forgiveness involves relinquishing control in order to participate in the life-giving flow of God's kingdom, and hard-heartedness is the refusal to do that.

But we should not think that forgiveness is a piece of cake. Forgiveness is grueling, spiritual work that can demand everything of us, and can actually feel like dying itself. When we forgive, we are letting go of something, and letting go can feel like dying. The promise is that this dying will not be the end of us, but in fact, is how we allow the life of God's kingdom to flow through us.

Professor Albert Raboteau of Princeton University has given a lecture, that is available online, entitled "Forgiveness and the African American Church Experience." In that lecture, which is enormously powerful, Dr. Raboteau speaks of the shooting in June 2015 at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where a 21-year-old white supremacist shot and killed 9 people during a Bible study, and during the court proceedings, several family members of those killed told the young man that they forgave him. You could feel the contrast between the open, broken hearts of those families and the fearful, violent, hardened heart of the young man.

This coming Tuesday, September 15, is the 57th anniversary of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, where dynamite under the church steps took the lives of 4 young African American girls. The Sunday school lesson that day at 16th Street Baptist Church had been entitled "A Love that Forgives."

This past Friday was the 19th anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks in our country, attacks whose pain continues.

The theme of forgiveness brings us to spaces like these, spaces of violence, spaces of anger, spaces of grief and loss. What does forgiveness even mean in these places? What would God's mercy look like? Where is the life-giving flow of God's kingdom in these kinds of places? Forgiveness moves around and in us when we are

the ones who have been hurt. Forgiveness moves around and in us when we are the ones who have done the hurting. Forgiveness has to do with our relationships to others, and forgiveness has to do with our relationships to ourselves and our past, what we want to govern our lives as we move forward.

When we forgive someone, we send their debt away. We relinquish our hold on them, we relinquish our leverage, we give up the power of revenge over them. We can feel why this is so objectionable. We may be able to see how forgiveness might help someone else to move forward in their lives, but when we are the ones who have been hurt in some way, when someone has trespassed against us, it can almost feel wrong to forgive, the hurt is too deep, we want our offenders to suffer in order to maintain the justice and moral order of the universe. If the sin is forgiven, it can feel as though the moral integrity of the universe has been disrupted. So we hold onto the sin, we bind it to ourselves, and we don't want to let it go.

One of the things that is so interesting about forgiveness is that we can see that forgiveness and hardness of heart have not only to do with our interpersonal relationships, but also have to do with matters of economics. The New Testament itself bears witness to this in the texts of the Lord's Prayer, by using an economic term – forgive us our *debts* – in Matthew's version, but a religious term – forgive us our *sins* – in Luke's version. Forgiveness can be every bit as challenging, and hardness of heart is every bit as much of a reality, whether we are talking about economic debts or relational sins.

In Exodus 14, we are dealing with Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Pharaoh's economy has oppressively controlled and benefited from the cheap labor of the Hebrew slaves for 400 years, and Pharaoh does not want his economy, built on the backs of the Hebrew slaves, to be disrupted. When the Hebrew slaves depart at the beginning of Exodus 14, Pharaoh and his advisors say, "What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?" Pharaoh and his advisors cannot imagine the Egyptian economy without its basis in slavery. Pharaoh's hard-heartedness, we can see, was driven by his limited economic imagination, he could not imagine exchanging the economics of domination for the economics of neighborliness.

In our gospel text from Matthew 18, Jesus tells a parable about a slave whose king forgave him a debt of 10,000 talents, which your Bible notes will likely indicate would have been the equivalent of 150,000 years of wage, or what some kids have called a bagillion dollars. Many of us may be instinctively inclined to spiritualize Matthew 18, to talk about this forgiveness as having to do with a really, really big sin. And that can certainly work interpretively, but the straight meaning of the text has to do with the cancellation of an economic debt, something like the biblical principle of jubilee. The Jubilee principle comes from Leviticus 25, whereby the entire Israelite economy was to practice the cancellation of debt every 50 years, something which many people have pointed out that, as far as we can tell, no Israelite period had the moral courage to put

into practice. It just wouldn't have been practical, they would have said. Economies of acquisition have always tended to out-argue economies of neighborliness.

What we see with the slave in Matthew 18, forgiven his massive debt, is that the forgiveness did not really touch his heart. Because he comes upon someone who owes him a debt, a much more modest debt, and he refuses to let the forgiveness flow through him. He takes it for himself, but will not give it to others. His heart is hardened, in a way that bears a resemblance to the heart of Pharaoh.

And what we may observe about the imaginations of both Exodus and Matthew is that they both establish relinquishment and forgiveness, rather than hard-hearted accumulation, as the basis for God's realm, for God's economy. The kingdom of God is not built by accumulation and acquisition and erecting defenses to protect our hearts or our lives. In Matthew's gospel, the unforgiving slave is handed over to be tortured, and then Matthew remarks – in words that are more than a little troubling – that God will do the same to everyone who does not forgive their brother or sister from the heart. Forgiveness will be the way. In Exodus, Pharaoh, who is the poster-child for accumulation, sends his horses and chariots to capture and reacquire the Hebrew slaves, and God tosses the empire's forces into the sea. The coercive economy of acquisition and accumulation, built on the cheap labor of the Hebrew slaves, is overturned by the God who forgives debts and summons us to pay that forgiveness forward.

Forgiveness and letting go are at the heart of the Christian faith, and they touch so many aspects of our lives – from our interpersonal relationships, to matters of economics, to our national life. Hard-heartedness can occur in all of these aspects of our lives as well. This past week, my wife Laura and I were talking about this, and Laura and I were reflecting on "What is the core problem with being hard-hearted?" I would be very interested to hear your thoughts about this, but at least two thoughts occurred to us. One thought is that when our hearts have become hardened, we may not be able to see the humanity of others. When slave-masters would routinely break up families of enslaved people, to sell them off, separating parents from children, sisters from brothers, you can only do that when you do not see the enslaved people as human beings just like you, when you see them as inferior beings, when your heart has been hardened against them. And a second thought is that when our hearts have been hardened, we will refuse to participate in the changes and the transformations that God is bringing about, because we are afraid to let go of what we have now.

Friends, where does Christ's summons to forgive land in your life these days? What might God be inviting you to let go of; what about the status quo might you need to relinquish, in order to participate in the flow of God's kingdom? And where do you resist that? Where does your heart hold on, not wanting to let go? Invite the Lord into all of those spaces, because that is where God can do really powerful work. To God and to God alone, be all the glory, honor, and power, now and forever. Amen.