

“ On the path to Forgiveness”

Sermon on

A reading from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians: 2:1-10 (Translation: the Voice, see the bulletin for July 12, 2020)

“Look what you made me do”...have you ever heard this line?

Its a terrible line, and so wrong. No one can make one do anything. Violence is always a choice.

But-this favourite line of abusers over the centuries, this “mood” is deeply entrenched in pop culture. Viewers, listeners or readers can dine on a vast buffet of violent revenge stories: “Game of thrones”, pop music (Taylor Swift has a song of that title) and “Hero revenge” novels are a big thing. All media promise satisfaction via release of anger and hurt through revengeful action.

But does life work that way? Not really. Revenge leads only to more bad feelings and to more violence. Revenge does not solve anything. Wanting to lash out in response to hurt is natural, but only builds up the cycle of violence.

It may have felt initially “good” to “smash the other’s nose” (with the fist or with words), but no one really feels less hurt after having inflicted hurt on an aggressor.

In the Bible we find the famous “an eye for an eye”. My Old Testament prof thought its original intention was to limit the escalation of violence in response to a hurt. “Only” an eye for an eye, as opposed to going out and killing the person who blinded your brother. This was progress 3000 years ago. Unless (heaven forbid!) our society crumples to the point of everybody exercising retaliative violence -this is not helpful anymore.. Jesus’s teaching has raised our standards:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also..... “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor[**b**] and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on

the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? (Matthew 5) But Jesus radical call for non violence demands so much. And it leaves us wondering: Does this not leave the abuser free reign? If we don't stop the violence then what prevents it from continuing? And where is justice for the victim? Abusers must be stopped and brought to face their responsibility for their crimes. They must be stopped - not with revengeful actions, but with actions that stop the threat and ideally offer the abuser a way forward towards healing.

What I do take from Matthew's lines is that Jesus is intent on that his followers break the cycle of violence. That we respond to aggression in a way that is not the first knee jerk reaction our biological conditioning releases for us, which would be: You hit me, so I hit you back.

Jesus' words do not only apply to physical aggression:

Words or spiteful gestures hurt as much as a slap to the face. So the consequence of Matthew would be that as much as I am tempted to hurl an insult back when I have been slighted, there is a higher road that is the better choice.

The path of forgiveness bears the promise of life, where the path of revenge bears the promise of destruction.

And Peter came to Jesus and asked: Lord, when someone has sinned against me, how many times ought I forgive him? *Once? Twice? As many as seven times?* And Jesus answered You must forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven. (Matthew 5:21-22). In other words: Forgiveness has no limit.

Now let me clarify- If a woman asked me how to forgive her husband who repeatedly belittles her and slaps her, I would answer that forgiveness is a step to be chosen when you are safe from further aggression. First the abuse must stop. Forgiveness must not enable further abuse.

See an example in our letter of this morning. Paul chose not to go to Corinth a third time. He did not want to risk to be attacked again, and he did not want his presence to be divisive. From a safe distance he writes in a Spirit of forgiveness, the people who hurt him are at a safe distance.

The Rev. Mpho Tutu ,who chose to forgive the murderer of a dear friend says wisely "Forgiveness isn't a requirement. It's not an "ought to" or "should." I would never put "should" next to "forgive." But I think that what you do

discover in the process of working towards forgiveness is that it's not the person who you forgive who's the ultimate beneficiary—it's you, yourself.

In a way, if I say, "I forgive you," I'm saying, "I no longer reserve the right to take revenge on you for that thing that you have done." The experience of walking around with something that is unforgiven is that every time the image of that person comes up who you haven't forgiven, there's a churning that you experience—an anger, an anguish, a hurt. In a way, they get to decide how you're feeling. They get to have the decision of what your day feels like by how much they intrude on your consciousness.

To do us honour as humans, as much as revenge stories are popular in culture there is also a great hunger for forgiveness and peace in us. We yearn for forgiveness stories because God is at work in us through the Holy Spirit. Paul points to the choice we have : We can not be naive or we will fall prey to (the force which Paul calls)"Satan"(2. Cor. 2:11) . We might prefer another name for this reality, but "Satan" is a very real energy which draws us into destruction- of the very relationships we need for a good life. Guided by the energy of God we make the choice to forgive.

But what is forgiveness? Its not so easy to answer, isnt it?

I like the definitions which can be found on the website of "The Charter for Compassion" (an organization founded by comparative religion scholar Karen Armstrong)

"Forgiveness is the principled decision to give up your justified right for revenge; it also requires the forgiver to recognize that the offender is "human like myself." And further they name:

"It's important to note that forgiveness does not exclude a passionate or painful response to being hurt, or witnessing others being hurt. Anger, sorrow, rage, and despair are a part of the process, and may be the launching pad for forgiveness. Essentially, this means that we do not endlessly replay past gripes and grievances; it is rather the ability to live with the hurt without being held captive by it; it means not being defined by those who have hurt us and not being broken by our own victimhood."

There is a lot in this quote, isn't there.

Forgiveness is do-able. And it does not depend on whether the aggressor is repentant or not. I have often confused myself about "forgiveness" and reconciliation – but they are two different things.

Reconciliation is when 2 former hostile parties come together and work together. Reconciliation requires that both parties are alive and willing to move into that direction, which is not always possible. Forgiveness is something we can do on our own.

A good example of reconciliation is our truth and reconciliation process here in Canada which was modeled on the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa which enabled the transition from Apartheid to Democracy to be done without bloodshed.

So forgiveness can be unilateral- you can forgive someone who is dead, or who is alive and unrepentant. The freeing effect is there, you do not depend on the co-operation of the other. But reconciliation requires two parties.

Lets have a look at how Paul's passage in 2 Corinthians 2 models a path of forgiveness.

In the case of the Corinthian church, Paul had gotten humiliated by some people in the congregation which he founded. They, after meeting other apostles, voiced their doubts about Paul's suitability for the ministry he had created. Very concerned, he went to visit them, tried to straighten things out. Apparently the visit produced the opposite. He then wrote them another letter, "full of tears", composed with great difficulty, and a broken heart. He now is concerned that he perhaps overdid it in this letter. *"It wasn't my intention to depress you or cause you pain; rather, I had hoped you would see it for what it was—a demonstration of the overwhelming love I have for all of you."* This sounds like an apology for words that may have been too extreme. (We don't have these words, the letter is lost). While he writes them the letter we do have, 2 Corinthians, he learns that the Corinthians actually received that tearful letter well. But, Titus reports, they then ostracized the individual (s?) who attacked Paul. Now there is multiple forgiveness needed. Paul needs to forgive them for the hurt, the congregation needs to forgive those who caused the hurt, and - the congregation seems to forgive Paul for not matching their expectations, for being the imperfect human who he is.

All that would make for a renewed relationship, all that would prevent the split of the congregation, the failure of the new community.

Because even when only two in a community fight, all are affected. If anyone has caused harm (to me) Paul says, he has ultimately harmed the whole community because everyone is now upset. That's why the whole community needs to forgive, and Paul will forgive as well.

You see how human this all is? Forgiveness is a complicated, often lengthy process, but all begins with the resolve to walk that path rather than the path of hatred and resentment.

Bishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter, the Rev. Mpho Tutu, wrote a very helpful "The book of forgiving. The fourfold path." This book tells countless stories of physical and emotional injury and how those affected took the path towards freedom. For forgiveness sets the injured person free. Forgiveness releases that knot in the stomach that comes every time when I think about the person who hurt me or hurt my loved one.

Another point that is made by the Tutu's and other people of faith :

"Forgiveness is about recognizing that life is unpredictable and messy, that we all may end up in the role of the one who hurts and the one who is hurt at times. This is a recognition of our common humanity." (Charter for Compassion)

I can not stay on a moral high horse if I truly want to forgive. Rather I need to see the person behind the deed, the circumstances, the possibility of my own aggression or wrong doing.

Bishop Desmond Tutu describes such a situation . He was waiting in a hotel lobby to be picked up by a famous celebrity . He was going to go in her car and with her to a place where he was to be presented with a prestigious human rights award. He was wearing his purple clergy shirt and collar, black pants and suit jacket, and a cap. Sitting there, the bellboy behind the counter approached him: "Are you Miss (celebrity name) driver?"

After decades of put downs and institutionalized racism which he and everyone hoped were behind us...this experience on the morning of such a prestigious event hurt deeply. Was it the cap? Was it the boy's ignorance, not knowing a clergy shirt from a regular shirt? Was it the assumption that any black man in a hotel lobby must be a driver? Desmond says that he needed

quite a bit of time to put himself into the bellboy's position to be able to forgive him.

So we come to empathy: Forgiveness requires the ability to have empathy. Apostle Paul shows that he has this when he writes “ instead of continuing to ostracize him, I encourage you to offer him the grace of forgiveness and the comfort of your acceptance. Otherwise, if he finds no welcome back to the community, I'm afraid he will be overwhelmed with extreme sorrow and lose all hope”. (2 Cor. 2:7)

He can put himself in the shoes of the one who offended him. Now that the larger community has shown feelings for Paul, this person is isolated and needs to be reintegrated. A sentence like the one above shows that Paul harbors no desire for revenge, and has already forgiven the person.

If you find yourself in a situation where you have feelings of bitterness, or fear, or tight chest whenever you think about what a certain person did to you or to someone you love, I strongly recommend the Tutu's book. It is easy to read and very practical. It not only speaks about the path to forgiveness, but also about how to do it, step by step. The Tutu's outline 4 steps which they learned through countless personal injuries under Apartheid, and in the work of the South African Truth and reconciliation commission which Desmond chaired. These four steps are: To tell the story. To name the injury. To consciously resolve to forgive. To renew or release the relationship. It recommends that you do not walk this path alone but with a trusted person if at all possible, because it can be a long journey. It may take hours or years. All depends on your situation. Clergy can be such a person, counsellors, or a trusted friend.

There are heartbreakingly beautiful prayer and meditation poems in this precious work and I would like to close with one.

Meet me here
speak my name
I am not your enemy
I am your teacher
I may even be your friend
Let us tell our truth together, you and I

My name is anger: I say you have been wronged
My name is shame: My story is your hidden pain
My name is fear: My story is vulnerability
My name is resentment: I say things should have been different
My name is grief
My name is depression
My name is heartache
My name is anxiety
I have many names
and many lessons
I am not your enemy
I am your teacher

*Desmond Tutu, Mpho Tutu:
The book of Forgiveness, Harper One 2014 pg114*