Pentecost 15 Proper 19

September 13, 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

Our readings today are all about forgiveness. Genesis sets the stage with the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers, an act of mercy and grace beyond their wildest hopes. By forgiving his brothers for their jealousy, the ways they hurt him, even risking his life, Joseph opened the door to reconciliation and to abundant life for his family.

It was Joseph’s faith that allowed him to say, “Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.” It was faith that freed Joseph from to forgive his brothers.

But I don’t think we should assume that it was easy for Joseph to forgive his brothers. More likely, it had been a long process, with old wounds reopening when he saw his brothers for the first time in many years, wounds that perhaps meant Joseph had to forgive his brothers again for what they’d done to him years earlier.

There are a two basic reasons we don’t forgive others.

One is that we simply don’t know how. If others in our lives don’t model forgiveness, then we can’t learn how to do it ourselves. Just as Jesus says it’s only by being loved that we can love others, it’s only by being forgiven that we understand what it means to forgive others.

The other reason is that we don’t *want* to forgive.

Sometimes, we think that forgiving someone sends the wrong message. But forgiveness doesn’t mean the wrong to us was imagined, nor does it mean that we are wrong to feel hurt by it. It doesn’t mean we go forward acting as if what they did never happened. It doesn’t mean we stand by passively and allow them to do it again.

But it does mean we give up our desire to judge them for it. It means we give up the anger and hurt that we’re tempted to cling to, the bitterness that can become a part of us if we’re not careful. It means we give up our self-righteousness that tells us they’re wrong and we’re right, they’re bad and we’re good. It means we give up our desire for vengeance and seek reconciliation instead.

Forgiveness means giving up a burden that we carry, and that’s a challenge. Even when we know that our bitterness and anger weigh us down and keep us from experiencing true joy, sometimes we still don’t want to let go and forgive. Once bitterness and anger have made a home in our hearts, the question of what will fill the hole that will be left when we give them up can be too scary of a question to contemplate.

Forgiveness is hard work. It’s work that takes time. But it is deeply necessary work which allows us to move forward. “By forgiving those who have sinned against us, we don’t allow the past to dictate our future. Forgiveness breaks the chains of anger and bitterness and frees us to live new lives.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

On two occasions, I had the fortune to tour the New Life Children’s Center in Canyon Lake, Texas. Every year, this Lutheran Social Services facility serves as home for 150-200 girls aged 11 to 17. These are girls who have been victims of the bad decisions of others, usually their parents. They’ve suffered neglect and abuse. Most have started to make bad decisions of their own.

Girls stay at the center for as long as 6 to 8 months, and, for far too many of them, it’s the first time they experience a stable living environment, the first time they can learn to count on the adults in their lives to have their best interests in mind.

Their amazing volunteer director, Lisa, told us that they tell the girls, “Don’t hug a grudge.” Because when you can’t forgive, when you can’t let go – when you hug your grudge – you can’t embrace love or joy, you can’t know peace. You can’t move forward to something better.

But moving forward is a scary thought for these girls. When your life has been full of uncertainty, difficulty, and pain, it’s hard to learn to trust that there’s another way life can be for you. When the people who ought to know better, the people who are supposed to be taking care of you and protecting you, when they’re the ones who are hurting you, it’s hard to learn how to love and it’s hard to learn how to forgive.

And it’s hard to have abundant life, the kind of life that Jesus said he came to bring us.

When Peter asks how many times we ought to forgive, what he leaves unasked is, “When is it OK for me to withhold forgiveness?”

With his response, Jesus isn’t trying to make him do math. He’s saying “Don’t keep score. Just forgive. God doesn’t set limits for forgiving you. Don’t set them for others.”

We can’t hug a grudge and embrace the abundant life Jesus promises at the same time. We have to pick one.

What holds us back is our fear. When bitterness and anger have made a home in your heart, when the hurts of life have left wounds that feel like they will never heal, when it feels like every choice you make is the wrong one, it can be all too easy to hug a grudge so tightly that it seems impossible to let it go.

But hugging a grudge is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick. And it doesn’t work that way.

Both accepting forgiveness and offering forgiveness to others can be daunting. But we’re stuck in a holding pattern unless we do. We can never have true happiness until we learn to let go of our grudges, let go of the pain from all those wounds.

Judging others, being bitter or angry – these take energy. Hugging a grudge takes effort. When we leave the judgment to God, when we practice forgiving others and forgiving ourselves, we find freedom. We find peace for our souls.

And then we have the energy to embrace that abundant life Jesus promises, sharing God’s mercy and love with others.

Jesus didn’t tell his followers to go out into the world and judge others. He told them to go out into the world and share the good news with others.

And part of that good news is that God isn’t keeping track of how many times God forgives our sins. Instead, we are forgiven, loved, and freed from our fear that God will abandon us, freed to go out into the world and forgive others as we have been forgiven, so they too may know God’s love.

May it be so for us.

1. Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Dear Working Preacher*, workingpreacher.org, September 6, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)