Making Peace Through Forgiveness

Opening Prayer:

O God, today we explore the mystery of forgiveness.

We look upon its beauty as a multi-faceted diamond refracting brilliant light and color in multiple directions all at once.

How would we live and relate to one another without forgiveness?!

It is a gem of great price!

To those we’ve hurt, we say, “I’m sorry for the pain I’ve caused you. I understand completely if you need time and distance apart from me to heal. If you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I’d like to make things right and do better next time.”

To those who’ve hurt us, we long to find the grace to let them off the hook, to let go of the past and move on, to believe the best about them even when they fail.

Alas, forgiveness isn’t easy. And it may take time.

Heal us, oh God, so that we can forgive. AMEN

Sacred Reading: Psalm 32:1-5

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’, and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Sermon:

Our Sunday School children have been practicing how to be peacemakers. They first talked about having the peace from God live in their very bodies. Then they learned that listening carefully and with their whole bodies is an important part of becoming a peacemaker. Last Sunday they learned that when we get angry, we can share our anger with God. Today they learned how forgiving others is another part of being a peacemaker.

Earlier this morning, the children responded to questions like: Can you recall a time when you forgave someone? How did that feel? Was it difficult to do? Is there anyone you need to forgive? Are there any grudges you carry? What does it feel like when you carry a grudge?

The teacher explained, “When we have a grudge, we let ourselves stay mad at someone who has done something wrong to us. Sometimes it does take a while for us to feel ready to forgive someone and this is okay. But it is a very important for us to offer forgiveness and let go of the hurt we may feel and the grudge we may carry. When we forgive someone who hurt us, we are being a peacemaker.”

I think it’s important our children are learning about forgiveness, but maybe the most important thing we can communicate with them is what a mystery it is. I think we hold forgiveness in our hand like a delicate flower, gaze at it, wonder about it, appreciate its beauty, but never completely understand it. Can we help our children understand that forgiveness isn’t easy; and that it’s a life-long process?

Certainly, there are times to forgive, not only for the sake of making peace in a broken relationship, but for our own emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being.

If I’m seething with anger and resentment toward someone who has wronged me, there may be a piece of me that hopes the broken relationship can somehow be restored. But what matters more to me is letting go of the anger and resentment so that I can move on with my life. It’s finding a place of inner peace, rest, wholeness, and strength that has as much to do with reconnecting with the divine presence within me and reconnecting with my own true self as it does with reconnecting with the person who mistreated or wronged me.

I know from experience that reconnecting with my own true self allows me to reconnect with the source of unconditional love. My true self is then free to continue loving another person regardless of how I’ve been treated.

Bottom line, no true forgiveness is possible if it’s an act of the ego. The ego may go through the motions of forgiveness, but it seeks control, prestige, and the image of having it all together. Conversely, genuine forgiveness is possible if it’s an act of the true self.

This inner transformation and realization will change the way I relate to you even if it doesn’t change the way you relate to me.

I’m all for forgiveness as long as it’s about setting myself free from my ego, and not about gaining a desired response from or result in someone else. I’m more into personal transformation through forgiveness than into settling the score.

Frankly, I’m rather suspicious of the tendencies within myself and others to offer forgiveness too quickly. Such apologies are empty and insincere because they are nothing but public displays of the ego, not at all coming from the source of unconditional love.

But still I believe in the power of forgiveness. In my own spiritual practice, I forgive people whether or not they ask for forgiveness, I let go of grudges, I let go of resentment I’ve been holding onto, I let people off the hook, I stop holding their sins against them. I reaffirm and reconnect with the wholeness, beauty, and divine within me, and remind myself that no one can take that away from me. I reaffirm and reconnect with the wholeness, beauty, and divine within the other person, and remind myself that every one of us is better than our worst moments.

**Despite what we read in Matthew’s Gospel where Peter asks Jesus is he should forgive his brother seven times. Not seven times, answers Jesus, but seventy times seven -** Matthew 18:21-22.…despite that text, t**here are some people who we need to stop forgiving. They don’t need forgiveness. They need to be held accountable for their actions.**

**The best insight into forgiveness I’ve ever had is hearing a child say to his mother, “I’m sorry,” and the mother replying, “Sorry didn’t do it. YOU did it.”**

**In other words, asking forgiveness is meaningless unless it results in a change in one’s behavior, taking full responsibility for the harm done. If one is not committed to a path of full healing that includes confession, repentance, and restitution, he might as well save his breath, and never utter those empty words, “I’m sorry.”**

**Remember the bumper sticker “I’m not perfect, just forgiven?” Always seemed like a cop-out to me.**

**How about one that reads “I’m learning from my mistakes?” or “I’m learning to not make the same mistake twice.”**

**Society looks up to those of us who are able to suffer great wrongs and still forgive the ones who wronged them. Nelson Mandela is rightly revered for having spent 27 years in prison and forgiving the very people who put him there.**

**Yet, when working with people who have been wronged, wounded, or victimized, I try not to make forgiveness a goal. Perhaps the best thing the church can do is wait patiently with victims until they are goo and ready to forgive.**

**Marie Fortune, who works with domestic violence survivors, helps us reframe our understanding of forgiveness. She advocates a new Christianity that denies the misuse of Christian texts and teachings to justify violence against women, a Christianity that responds pastorally to victims, calls perpetrators to account, and changes institutions that reinforce the norm of violence against women.**

**Before forgiveness can be considered, she asserts, perpetrators must meet certain prerequisites of justice. Once justice has been accomplished for victims, even in a limited way, forgiveness becomes a viable opportunity. Prior to justice, forgiveness is an empty exercise. In many cases, victims/survivors need to be urged not to forgive so quickly. Forgiving too readily or too soon may only perpetuate the cycle of violence.**

**Victims/survivors need to hear about a God who stands with the exploited and abused; who calls the powerful to account; who offers justice and forgiveness as the tools of healing; who expects bystanders to support victims and call the abuser to account.**

**In Judaism, the burden rests with the one who causes harm, not with the victim. Medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides explained that the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, which our Jewish siblings celebrate this coming Wednesday, provided corporate atonement for sins against God. But sins against one’s neighbor (or intimate partner) are not pardoned unless the offender compensates the victim and apologizes. This means confession, taking responsibility, repentance, and restitution to the one harmed.**

**Fundamentally, both Judaism and Christianity link the genuine confession, repentance and restitution on the part of the offender to the expectation of forgiveness on the part of the one harmed. Justice is a necessary precursor to forgiveness.**

**Fortune isn’t the only one writing about this!**

**Traci C. West – Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics;**

**James Poling – The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem;**

**Nancy Nason-Clark – The Battered Wife: How Chirsians Confront Family Violence;**

**Toinette Eugene – Balm for Gilead: Pastoral Care for African American Families Experiencing Abuse;**

**Pamela Cooper-White – The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church’s Response;**

**Carol Adams – Woman-Batering;**

**Catherine Kroeger – Women, Abuse, and the Bible: How Scripture Can Be Used to Hurt of Heal;**

**Al Miles – Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Need to Know;**

**Marie Fortune – Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin;**

**Marie Fortune – Keeping the Faith: Questions and Answer for the Abused Woman;**

**Marie Fortune – Keeping the Faith: Guidance for Christian Women Facing Abuse;**

**Marie Fortune – Is Nothing Sacred? The Story of a Pastor, the Women He Sexually Abused, and the Congregation He Nearly Destroyed;**

**Marie Fortune – Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited;**

**Marie Fortune - Sexual Abuse by Clergy: A Crisis for the Church.**

**Forgiveness is God’s gift for victims and survivors. Any benefit that it brings to offenders is a bonus.**

**What do victims and survivors need to know about forgiveness?**

* **It is not condoning or pardoning, making everything okay as if harm had not been done by the perpetrator;**
* **It is not about any obligation on the part of the victim/survivor;**
* **It is difficult but not impossible when the accountability of the offender is absent;**
* **It does not assume any degree of future relationship with the person who caused the harm;**
* **It is finally about letting it go and getting on with life.**

So far we’ve been focusing on offering forgiveness to those who have wronged us. But very briefly, what about asking and receiving forgiveness for our own misdeeds?

Psalm 32 certainly suggests that there’s a time for bringing our misdeeds out into the open, definitely before God, possibly before others.

Look what happened to the psalmist when he kept silent about his sins? “While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.”

Unacknowledged unconfessed sin may eat away not only at our psyches but our bodies. Remaining silent about our sin may make us physically sick.

So I would say the sooner we own up for what we’ve done wrong, the sooner we’re ready to repair the damage, the healthier and happier we’ll be.

Just this past week, I struggled with a guilty conscience for something I had done. I wondered if perhaps I had hurt or offended another person. I wrestled a bit whether to shrug it off and leave well enough alone, but decided instead to phone that person to apologize. It just seemed like the right thing to do, and I trust that it brings ongoing health and healing in my relationship with that person.

As we move into Holy Communion, an expression of our oneness in Christ, may we consider the words of Matthew’s Jesus, “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

Before we share these gifts, the bread and wine, may we ponder in silence what forgiveness and reconciliation will look like in our own lives now and in the coming days.