

Sermon for 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Whether we use William Shakespeare's idea of a sea change from *The Tempest* or Thomas Kuhn's idea of a paradigm shift from *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, our minds struggle to process a death toll approaching 200,000 in the U.S. alone from the pandemic, to appreciate the pervasiveness of systemic racism, to understand the nastiness and polarity of our public life. On Thursday, I attended a presentation by a priest in our diocese which focused on churches discerning the difference between adaptive challenges versus technological solutions. There is a need to step back and take time to appreciate what response best suits a presenting issue or system. We tend to want to slap a band-aid on a wound that actually needs stitches. I think we realize that our world as we know it will never be the same. Images from the media have been seared into our minds. What we do with these indelible marks and trauma, however, can lead us closer to or further away from God.

I was speaking with a friend about a puzzling and painful issue in my life that involves forgiveness. She mentioned the Quaker concept of "to proceed as way opens." As way opens? When/how? In his book *The Sacred Compass: The Way of Spiritual Wisdom*, J. Brent Bill writes: "Counter to our lives of action, the sacred compass tells us to take time to wait for God's guidance before moving ahead."¹ The answer is up to God, of course, and I think we are able to discern the way God offers us more easily if we are in a state of deep prayer and openness rather than rooted in our egos which so often think solving things is up to us. And often any way forward seems truly impossible. Imagine the Israelites in our story -- pharaoh's army is upon them with their horses and their chariots, while they are without defenses. Moreover, the cloud indicating God's presence lighting the way is now behind rather than in front of them. And then the way opens that no one could have predicted or seen, the way that seems

truly impossible. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers -- all of them drowned when the waters returned to the way we normally know them.

Peter asks: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus's reply conveys a sense of a number beyond counting and offers a marked contrast with a passage from Genesis, in which Lamech boasts to his wives: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." It's clear that those who follow Jesus are called to be agents of light and reconciliation, not agents of escalating violence.

If we are still counting the number of times you extend forgiveness, we are missing the point about what forgiveness entails. And oftentimes forgiveness seems utterly impossible and then suddenly the way opens to free us.

Jesus, earlier in this chapter of Matthew which we heard last Sunday, has not counseled his disciples to sit back and do nothing in some false piety when they are confronted by someone who has wronged them. Indeed, he says that we first go in private to the one who has wounded us in some way, then (if no satisfaction) we go back with two or three members of the church, and only if that has no effect to treat the one who has injured you as a tax collector or Gentile – i.e. to not include them in your community.

Jesus then relates the parable about the king and his slaves (or servants). While the allegorizing way Matthew has shaped the story seems to imply that the king somehow equals God, some commentators report a two-step process. Jesus himself offers a parable, a story of an Oriental sultan and a servant who has been handling huge amounts of money. Amy-Jill Levine cautions against using these ancient stories to serve "as an artificial and negative foil that makes Jesus look original or countercultural in cases where he is not....Instead, the parables more often tease us into recognizing what

we've already always known....The point is less that they reveal something new than that they tap into our memories, our values, and our deepest longings, and so they resurrect what is very old, and very wise, and very precious. And often, very unsettling."ⁱⁱ

Jewish law would not permit the imprisonment of a wife for her husband's debts. Ten thousand talents is a fantastic amount of money – a debt for which there is no possibility of repayment. The servant's debt—possibly through embezzling tax income—is almost beyond measure. His assertion that he simply needs his king's patience in order for him to pay back everything is grounded in total denial of his situation—he can't be honest even about that as he begs for mercy. Ten thousand talents represent a day's wages of 100,000,000 workers or more than the annual tax income from all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria.

And then the way suddenly opens. The king sees this dishonest and hapless individual and takes compassion on him, sparing him and his family from complete desolation and ruin. This extraordinary gift -- a way that would be impossible -- could have provoked joy and gratitude, a drawing nearer to the light, grace, and mercy of God. But it was not appreciated by the servant – instead, he demands payment of a significant but perhaps manageable debt from another slave/servant and throws him into prison.

Some commentators maintain that the parable as told by Jesus may originally have ended with his master's question: "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you," with the verses suggesting torture being a sort of commentary on the parable by the author of the gospel. In any case, we are left with the idea of mercy being a characteristic of God which we are to emulate and God's compassion able to cover our own incalculable debts of whatever sort they may be. It's no wonder that the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray and through them to us asks for forgiveness for ourselves but couples it with forgiveness of others.

But Peter does not ask Jesus how often God will forgive him? Peter is very much like us – hapless at times and yet given a distinct and holy responsibility by Jesus. Normally, it's a lot easier to focus on the evil without – on those that sin against us--

than on what is in our hearts and minds and the systems that may be unjust in which we participate, knowingly or not, that lead to others' impoverishment and for which our lives should be drawn to alleviating in some even small way. Richard Rohr reports that two-thirds of the teachings of Jesus deal directly or indirectly about forgiveness. He suggests: "Forgiveness is an entire attitude of forgiving reality for being what it is, forgiving the tragic flaw, forgiving an imperfect world."ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, the forgiveness that we are called to as followers of Jesus is a path to the fullness of life.

When we consider our own day -- the numbers of refugees in the world, the people seeking asylum here, the reality of climate change, the possibility of terrorism, the fires that rage on the west coast, we feel that things are out of our control and fear that we will be consumed by them. Our problems seem incalculable and beyond us even as many live in denial. And yet as members of the Body of Christ our lives are somehow intertwined with lives around the world, with all those nameless and voiceless children and adults. Is not God's forgiveness and mercy not extended to us in our lives of privilege? Should not our own incalculable blessings, like the grace extended to the servant, be the means to transform our hearts and bring our lives closer to God's light—a light that embraces all of creation? To have our very lives offer a way that will open with those who truly live without hope. How can we together as a community called to be in this place discern together our blessings as well as our debts, our graces as well as our responsibilities. How can this knowledge lead us closer to God? *Amen.*

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ⁱ J. Brent Bill, *Sacred Compass: The Way of Spiritual Discernment* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008) page 1 of 195

ⁱⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, "What the Prodigal Son Story Doesn't Mean," *Christian Century*, Aug. 25, 2014]

[<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-08/parable-and-its-baggage>]

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Rohr: "The Little Way: A Spirituality of Imperfection." [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghxiSk9suNs>]