

The Work of Forgiveness is an Act of Courage (Matthew 18: 21-35)

“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” (Romans 14:10)

One thing I know for sure is It’s easier to judge others than to forgive them. Yet in Paul’s letter to the Romans, he’s pretty clear that judgment of others is way outside our realm of responsibility and rests squarely before God. And although forgiveness may be the journey we are called to as Christians, it is so much harder because it’s our work to do on behalf of ourselves and others, even when the others aren’t repentant or even care! We do it anyway because that’s what it means to follow Jesus.

No one gets through this life without being hurt or without giving hurt. In last week’s sermon, Richard told us “We have all received what we may rightly consider unfair, hurtful treatment from other Christians. While we may need time to reflect on what happened—we need not remain wounded. Wallowing in hurt or resentment gets us nowhere. We can become so accustomed to being aggrieved victims that we come to feel justified in wounding others. Jesus calls us to end cycles of emotional and spiritual violence by giving up grudge and resentment to him.”

Matthew’s Gospel today reminds us that conflict and pain are frequent and natural occurrences of life - both here in the church and out in the world. We’ve all been hurt by small slights or by life changing wounds from our earliest memories. I’m here to tell you that forgiveness is an act of tremendous courage; it is emotionally difficult, physically exhausting and spiritually demanding. Yet, even in the midst of the messy emotional work we do to forgive, it will liberate your soul and fill your hearts with peace - setting you free from all that has held you in bondage in small and big ways. Forgiveness sets *you* free first, and then releases the one who has hurt you. And remember that God’s loving, healing power is with you as you move through the turbulent process of forgiveness. God promised to never leave us alone. And even if you may not *feel* God’s presence, God is there, right beside you through it all.

One of the first steps to forgiveness is the decision you make that you’ve been held prisoner of the past long enough. You may never forget what was done to you, but you can stop remembering it detail by detail. To continually re-live the events of your hurt in your thoughts is to re-traumatize yourself each time you remember it. Although forgetting may never be possible, you can stop re-remembering it into your life over and over. By re-remembering, I’m referring to re-attaching the event it to our souls, like a leg or an arm are members attached to our bodies. It is a re-turning in our thoughts toward the events which hurt us - ruminating on them to our detriment.

There are circumstances where the restoration of relationship may be a healthy part of the process of forgiveness, and I so hope this is possible for you. However, it may take some time to regain a different perspective about the motivations and actions fueling the event. It may take place after a few conversations with the one who has hurt you or it may happen without a single encounter - either way, it begins with you. You simply realize that you no longer wish to continue suffering from the event and are ready for reconciliation. When a sister or brother who has hurt you is restored to you through God’s healing of the rift between you, that is a blessing! Certainly the grace of forgiveness is something for which we are grateful and toward which we are called to work. We are, after all, called to live together in love and charity. Forgiveness is a piece of Grace we can give to each other!

Now, To be very clear, I’m not referring here to violent or abusive relationships that continue to violate or abuse. There are times when the restoration of a relationship is neither a good thing or blessed - where separation is the best for all involved. This is true especially when the other has not yet done his or her work.

Reconciliation within oneself of the *reality* of a situation is also Grace. We can forgive the wrongs done to us, we can even forgive the person who hurt us, while at the same time moving forward without remaining in a face to face relationship with him/her. We may never forget what was done, but we can stop re-remembering it to our souls!

This is also true if the one who harmed us has died. There may be no possibility of physical or earthly restoration of relationship. Yet, the interior forgiveness work we do, even after they have died, can release US from the suffering of what has happened in our past. We can experience interior reconciliation, giving us peace. We must then leave their future in God’s hands.

Some years ago, an image was given to me when I was laboring toward my own forgiveness work. The image was of having a rope tied around my waist with the other end of the rope tied around the waist of the perpetrator. I could go nowhere without the other following along, tugging at me & holding me back, or walking along beside me - sometimes even walking ahead, leading me. The presence of the perpetrator and his actions were always with me, influencing every step I took and even the direction in which I was going - keeping me bound to the past and to the perpetrator. After many years, I decided that I had had enough of the presence of such sorrow, anger and evil in my life. That decision helped me to cut the rope from around my waist, freeing me from all that had hindered my journey in this life.

Forgiveness is an act of Courage. I invite you to be brave and forgive from your hearts. It’s good for you - mentally, physically, emotionally and especially spiritually! Amen.