

Proper 19A
Peace, Seattle
September 17, 2017
Matthew 18:21-35

EXCHANGING REVENGE FOR FORGIVENESS

In the film, PAY IT FORWARD, middle schooler Trevor McKinney gets an unexpected assignment from his social studies teacher on the first day of school:

“Think of an idea to change the world,” Mr. Simonet challenges the class, “and put it into action.”

In response to the challenge, Trevor develops a plan that he calls: "Pay It Forward."

The principle is this:

- If you benefit from another person’s act of good will, instead of “paying them back,” you “pay it forward” by sharing a good deed with three more people.
- Those three, in turn, express their gratitude by paying a good deed forward to three others, and so on...until every person in the whole world, in Trevor’s way of thinking, is touched by the unexpected kindness of another.

In today’s gospel the topic is forgiveness. How often, Peter wonders, am I supposed to forgive?

The standard answer, according to teaching of the day, was 3 times. Three strikes and they’re out.

But Peter offers a number which, in his mind, far exceeds the standard limit:

AS MANY AS SEVEN TIMES? he asks Jesus.

NOT SEVEN TIMES, Jesus answers, BUT SEVENTY-SEVEN TIMES!

Jesus might as well have said INFINITY PLUS ONE!

To illustrate his point, Jesus tells a story about a servant—imagine a mid-level manager—who owes his boss the king an unbelievably enormous debt—10,000 talents—a debt so large it far exceeds the manager’s ability to pay.

The king is ready to send the servant to prison and throw away the key, but something in the servant’s plea moves him; so instead of prison, the king forgives the man’s debt and sets him free.

Overcome with gratitude for this unexpected and undeserved blessing, the man leaves his boss’s office, hits the street, runs into a guy who owes him money, and promptly forgives that man his debt.

He pays it forward. . . RIGHT?! Wrong.

That’s what’s supposed to happen. But that’s not what does happen.

Instead, the servant takes the fellow who owes him a much smaller debt and has him thrown into prison until he pays every last red cent.

Because of the servant’s lack of compassion, instead of contributing to a spiral of blessing, the whole situation goes south, and at the end of the story the manager ends up a victim of his own selfish, stingy, grasping unforgiveness.

Some of Jesus’ parables teach us the way we’re supposed to act, the way we’re called to act as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Other parables, like this one, serve as a warning.

Unforgiveness imprisons both the offender and the offended, the sinner and the one sinned against. In fact, unforgiveness, at its worst, leads to a downward spiral of feuding and reprisals and becomes a living hell for everyone in the entire community.

In his book LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA, author **Gabriel Garcia Marquez** portrays a marriage that disintegrates over a bar of soap.¹

It was the wife's job, you see, to keep the house in order, including providing towels, toilet paper, and soap in the bathroom.

One day the soap in the bathroom is missing. It's a simple oversight, but the husband makes a big deal of it: I'VE BEEN WASHING WITHOUT SOAP FOR A WEEK! he shouts, and she vigorously denies that she had forgotten it.

The truth is she had forgotten, but with her pride now at stake she will not back down. For the next seven months they sleep in separate rooms and eat in silence.

EVEN WHEN THEY WERE OLD AND PLACID, writes Marquez, THEY WERE VERY CAREFUL ABOUT BRINGING IT UP, FOR THE BARELY HEALED WOUNDS COULD BEGIN TO BLEED AGAIN AS IF THEY HAD BEEN INFLICTED ONLY YESTERDAY.

The cycle of unforgiveness can never lead to freedom. It can only lead to prison.

The word RESENTMENT, Philip Yancey reminds us, means, literally, "to feel again." Resentment clings to the past, relives it over and over, picking each fresh scab so that the wound never heals.²

There is an alternative. The life of Jesus teaches us that we don't have to go on hurting each other, extracting our revenge; that our relationship can be transformed instead.

Laura Blumenfeld tells the story of how she discovered the power of transformative forgiveness in her book: REVENGE: A STORY OF HOPE.³

In 1986, her father, David Blumenfeld, a New York rabbi, was walking along a street in Jerusalem's old city. From an alley, a man approached Blumenfeld and shot him in the head. Blumenfeld survived the attack---but it had a profound affect on his daughter, Laura, who vowed revenge.

Twelve years later, Laura Blumenfeld, now a reporter for The Washington Post, extracted revenge from her father's attacker. But it wasn't the kind of revenge she had planned or sought.

Laura went to Jerusalem and dug into police records and newspaper archives. She discovered that the man arrested for the shooting, Omar Khatib, had been sent to prison. Laura approached Khatib's family, using her married name and posing as a reporter writing about revenge.

The Khatibs recalled the shooting with a casualness that infuriated Laura. To them her father was just "some Jew." But she worked hard to stay calm and keep her identity concealed.

¹ From P. Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace? p. 97-99.

² Ibid, p. 97.

³ Laura Blumenfeld. Revenge: A Story of Hope. (New York: Pocket Books, 2002)

Laura then began a correspondence with Omar himself.

Omar's first letter was an angry diatribe espousing his terrorist cause. But in his next letters, he became more human to Laura...

- Writing about his wretched childhood,
- telling how he would hide under the bed during the 1967 War,
- how he was terrified at the sound of Israeli soldiers.
- He wrote about his hopes for the future, his pursuit of a college degree while in prison, his favorite literature.

The climactic moment came at a parole hearing. Omar requested his release because of illness.

Laura appeared and addressed the court.

- She revealed her true identity as the daughter of the man Omar had shot.
- She said her father believed that if Omar is truly sick, he should be home with his family; that 13 years in prison was enough.

Then she turned to Omar himself and extracted this promise: that "on your honor between the Khatib family and the Blumenfeld family you will never hurt anybody again."

The power of forgiveness had turned Laura's desire for revenge into yearning for a transformed life; not only for Omar, but for herself.

Omar later wrote a letter to Laura's father:

"Laura was a mirror held up to your face so I could see you as a human being deserving to be admired and respected; I'm sorry I missed her message from the beginning," he wrote.

"I'm sorry I ever caused you or your family any pain."

The forgiveness you and I are most often called to offer may not be as dramatic or remarkable as this example, but it can be just as important in allowing us to live our lives truly free from resentments that would keep us bound to the past.

"When we refuse to forgive," writes Patricia Sanchez, "we place a tourniquet on the flow of love and the body of Christ grows loveless, bloodless, cold."⁴ We remain bound up in the past, captives in a prison of our own making. But life in God is meant to be directed toward the future.

When Jesus says, NOT SEVEN TIMES BUT SEVENTY SEVEN TIMES, he's calling each one of us, individually and as a community, to pursue just such transformative future.

Only the power of love and forgiveness can release us from captivity to the past and enable us to begin that God-work in us of transformation.

Every morning we wake up, we have a choice. As the love of God flows toward us we can either pulse it on, like the muscle of our hearts, or we can block its flow.

⁴ Patricia Datchuck Sanchez, *Forgiving and Being Forgiven*, writing in [CELEBRATION Preaching Resources](#), September 2002.

Today, as you come to the Table Christ has prepared, you will receive his body and his blood in and with the bread and wine.

- You'll eat and drink forgiveness;
- you'll ingest Christ's gift of freedom from whatever binds you;
- you'll receive again his promise of a transformed life.

As you come forward today, will you come with the name in mind of one person with whom you need to be reconciled? As you receive Christ, will you make the internal commitment to take the first step toward that reconciliation?

Let us pray.

Gracious God, in Jesus you show us how essential forgiveness is to the life of our community and the transformation of the world. Keep up your work within and among us. Embolden and empower us to reach out to those with whom we bear a grudge; those who have wronged us and those whom we have wronged. Give us the grace of a new beginning. For the sake of him who is the source of our forgiveness and hope, Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.