

Pentecost Proper 19, September 17, 2017, St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Genesis 50:15-21, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

I recall being told a story a number of years ago that came from Spain. It's about a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: Dear Pedro, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father. On Saturday dozens of Pedros' showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers. It's a reminder of how much we long for reconciliation.

The challenge for me with today's gospel – and I suppose for any self-reflective person – is this: how do I talk to others about forgiveness when I know I'm so much in need of it myself! We can spend our whole lives longing to be forgiven by others, by people who we love, and by people who we may only have met in passing, and yet we can't bring ourselves to ask for it – mostly, I think, because we fear it won't be given. So it's easier to live with the possibility of forgiveness than to take a chance that our hope was in vain. In that sense, I think, it's harder to ask for forgiveness than to offer it. And – frankly – to ask for forgiveness is to admit to ourselves that we were – and maybe still are – in the wrong. Human pride finds that a hard thing to do! It will prevent us from recognizing those places where we need to ask for forgiveness.

Some of you might remember Lee Atwater - a political consultant to two presidents - who had a deserved reputation for aggressive, manipulative and underhanded political tactics in the '80's. He was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. Only in the face of his impending death was he able to acknowledge the wrongs he had committed and ask for forgiveness. Among the many things he said, post-diagnosis, was how much he wished he could have lived a more authentic and loving life. What a tragedy that he came to that recognition only as he stood on death's doorstep.

So if we can ask for forgiveness, what then? What about the other or others we've wronged? I believe that the side of asking for forgiveness, of gifting our forgiveness to others, can be just as hard! Letting go of the energy that a sense of being wronged generates is also difficult.

And sometimes we carry around the animus that comes from that sense of having been wronged because to do anything else – to let down the defensive walls we've erected – is frightening. What might such a surrender unleash in us? What might that cost be? What will fill that void in our hearts, that energy? Easier to make sure those walls are strong and impenetrable than to risk the uncertainty, the emotional freight, that always comes with taking down those walls.

What we forget, I think – or perhaps what we have not allowed ourselves to learn – is that maintaining those walls comes at a cost.

I've mentioned before a very simple exchange between two Vietnam vets who were clearly also former P.O.W.s at the Vietnam war memorial in D.C. In talking about their former captors, one said "Have you forgiven them?" And the other replied, "You know, I just can't find it in my heart

to do that after all they did to me.” And they were silent for a bit. Then the first one replied, “I think if that’s the case then they’re still holding you prisoner.”

There’s a personal cost to not forgiving, as much as there’s a personal cost to asking for forgiveness. That cost comes in the diminishing or loss of valued relationships, in the damage we do to ourselves by holding back from asking, or holding on from gifting, forgiveness, and, ultimately, in the under-cutting of the communities of which we’re a part. That cost can hold us prisoner, long after the events themselves: the famed psychiatrist (and Episcopalian) Karl Menninger, once said that if he could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75 percent of them could walk out the next day!

Today’s readings certainly have a lot to say about both those things.

In Genesis’ story of the reunion of Jacob and Rachel’s children, the brothers who once sold Joseph into slavery have finally been overpowered by their guilt; finally they’re able to acknowledge it, and they beg Joseph to lift this heavy burden.

If I were to say anything to the brothers it would be this: thank God you’ve recognized that you can’t “mail it in” when it comes to asking for forgiveness! Or e-mail it in. Apologizing and asking for forgiveness is an “in person” thing. And it’s the beginning of reconciliation for this splintered family. And in Joseph’s tears, and their own, that reconciliation moves forward.

Paul’s been laying out in our last few weeks’ readings the basis for authentic community. Today we hear him summing it all up: Don’t judge one another. The kingdom of God will not be a community of uniform policies and practices. Only one policy will be universal: love. All will be well, as long as everything we do is dedicated to God. Placing love and God at the center, and letting go of any need to judge those who have wronged us, makes forgiving possible.

And then there’s Jesus! Jesus’ response to Peter and the subsequent parable remind us that we’re always standing in the need of grace – all of us, you and me, individually and together. When we would judge others, we would best first look at our own behaviors. Recognizing our own imperfection is the doorway to empathy, compassion, and love; to understanding where others are coming from in terms of their life experiences. In this context, forgiveness requires a type of spiritual relativism, requires the letting go of our “rightness” and recognition of our individual imperfection – there’s the humility that allows us to ask for forgiveness; there’s the humility that allows us to forgive.

For Christians, asking for forgiveness – and meaning it, and committing to what the old Prayer Book quaintly called “amendment of life” – asking for forgiveness and gifting forgiveness are the twin building blocks on which authentic Christian community is built. There’s one more thing that underpins these two; one central recognition that is truly a gift to all of us. Martin Luther recognized it in a dream. In that dream he found himself being attacked by Satan. The devil unrolled a long scroll containing a list of Luther's sins, and held it before him. On reaching the end of the scroll Luther asked the devil, "Is that all?" "No," came the reply, and a second scroll was thrust in front of him. Then, after a second came a third – the last one, as it turned out. Once

the devil had finished, Luther exclaimed with triumph: “You've forgotten something!.....write on each [scroll] ‘The blood of Jesus Christ God's son cleanses us from all sins.’” Luther’s great recognition – that it is through God’s grace, seen in Jesus’ self-sacrifice, that we are made whole – is a reminder to each and every one of us that in the end, God’s grace makes asking for forgiveness and forgiving possible ! But it’s up to us to take up that gift, and use it, and engage in the hard work of forgiveness, the better to move forward the work of God’s kingdom given to us at our baptisms.