

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 19 – Year A – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony

Genesis 50:15-21, Psalm 103:(1-7), 8-13, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

This morning I want to begin with a story. Who doesn't love a good story? This one comes from the Buddhist tradition and is about how God in God's providence provides us with opportunities to receive grace.

There was an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. "Such bad luck," they said to the man sympathetically.

"Maybe," the farmer replied.

The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbors exclaimed to the farmer.

"Maybe," he replied.

The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune. "Such bad luck," they said to the farmer.

"Maybe," he answered.

The day after the accident, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "What good fortune!" they exclaimed.

"Maybe," said the farmer.

I will confess that sometimes when I preach I am preaching to myself, and you all simply get to listen in and take from it what God has for you. This morning seems to be one of those times. So come with me while we spend a little time considering forgiveness and God's grace.

The story of the farmer strongly appeals to me. It appeals to me because with each thing that happened whether deemed bad or good, there was a maybe. Yes, or no are definite, foreclosing other options. But maybe,....maybe opens a whole world of possibility. Maybe is the place that leaves space for God's grace to work. Maybe leaves room for water to be turned into wine.

When Peter asked Jesus how many times he was required to forgive, Peter was asking for a finite number, seven seemed reasonable to him. Peter was looking for a boundary after which he could continue to hold on to anger, revenge and hostility. Peter sought a place where he could be absolved of further mercy, where he was let off the hook or could feel he'd done his part. Peter was looking for an endpoint. I've been there in some situations in my life. But what Jesus replied was that Peter and all of us must forgive 77 times or as often as is necessary.

We need to clearly see that Jesus was not inviting us to be door mats and let people take advantage of us. This was maybe ...in the same way that the farmer used the word. Maybe opens possibilities for true forgiveness and for reconciliation. Maybe opens the possibility that we can let go of the anger, revenge, the craving for our own definition of justice. Maybe opens the possibility that we can truly be free of the harm caused to us by another. Maybe opens the opportunity for us to look honestly at our own lives as well. It invites us to see where we have harmed another. It offers us the chance to acknowledge places where we need to seek forgiveness as well as forgive. Maybe gives us the potential to be aware of how God is working for good and to choose to cooperate with that work.

Forgiveness and its relationship to grace are often misunderstood. Forgiveness is a process that has two "sides", the one harmed and the one doing the harming. We often treat them as one transaction but they are not. The power to forgive is ours whether the other party is aware or involved in the forgiveness. Forgiveness in a very real sense is for the person doing the forgiving. This is how I think it works.

When I am the person who has done the harm and is seeking forgiveness to be authentic I enter into a step by step process. First, I must acknowledge the wrong, honestly and sincerely. There can be no true forgiveness without the acknowledgement of the harm. It is not enough to say something like "If I have offended you...." One must be sorry not simply say I am sorry. That is called repentance. Then one must resolve not to engage in the same hurtful behavior again, what the scripture calls 'turning from one's wicked way to live". It is a literal turning to face in another direction. At this point as far as possible one must make restitution, to try to return things to the harmony that existed before the harm. Finally then one can be truly forgiven, can truly forgive oneself and can be reconciled to God and neighbor.

When one is the person that has been harmed one has have a very different process to return to health and wholeness. Acknowledgement that the harm is real is key. One must not make excuses for the one who has done the harm. The blame should not be fixed on oneself, the culture, the environment or anything else. Those things may help us understand the person who has harmed us but they do not excuse the doing of harm to another. Having acknowledged the harm as real one must come to deal with the whole matter of revenge. One must come to grips with the very real desire to even the score. And one must let it go, release it not for the health of the other but for my own health. When I am the one harmed this is the nature of forgiveness to release oneself from the bondage in which the harm continues to hold me.

Whether you are the one harmed, or the one doing the harm, the matter of forgiveness and reconciliation are not humanly possible. They are only possible by the grace of God. And that is why forgiveness and grace are inescapably linked. Together they can bring peace to us and to those around us. And who among us would not like more peace in our lives?