

“Am I Putting Myself in the Place of God?”

Since earlier in the season after Pentecost, we have had readings from the Bible that refer to the importance of forgiveness, which is referred to prominently in the prayer to our Father that Jesus left us; "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." In other words, we have something important to do to connect with the Father who is the judge, an exchange, you could say. Let's take one more opportunity to consider an action that opens hearts and minds--especially our own.

Over the course of the summer of 2020, we have looked at forgiveness through the various windows offered by the scriptures made available to us in year A of the lectionary. There have been a lot of them connected with forgiveness in one way or another, and they have certainly connected with my own experience, and made me happy to think and write about forgiveness repeatedly. That is because I have learned something about myself in many years of reading and studying scripture, and later, preaching on the topic.

The conviction that I know best, and thus can be the judge of what is best for me and others is the one that has gotten me into the most trouble in life. I can say truthfully that I never threw any of my siblings down a well, as Joseph's brothers did; I never cursed anyone or wished them evil, as one sees from time to time in the scriptures, but I do remember one instance (more than one, if truth be told) where I was wrong in my judgment, and was ultimately glad to learn that I was wrong, and to forgive.

Here is one such instance:

There was a gang of guys who hung out along the front hall of our high school. All of them were athletes, and they followed the lead of the quarterback of the football team. They somehow settled on me as their choice for bullying, and I dreaded going past their hang-out place, because I was subjected to comments about my appearance, my vocabulary (I used too many big words in class, they had determined), my mother's "stupid" car (we had a normal 1960s car, a Chevrolet Impala)—anything they could comment on, they did.

Actually, in a sense, they probably did me a favor, because I walked miles out of my way over four years in high school to avoid going through that main hallway. It was good exercise. At last, the year came when the quarterback (and I, and the rest of our class) graduated. After the ceremony, I took my robe back to the study hall, and headed for the front door to meet my parents. Ahead of me, leaving the building for the last time, was the quarterback. I stood and watched him go, and whispered to myself, "Thank you, Jesus, I never have to see that _____ again," using a word that was not normally part of my great big vocabulary, and which I certainly should not have been using in the same sentence with the name of our Lord.

Many years passed. Something called “Facebook” came along, and, to my great surprise, I received a friend request from the quarterback. I was incredulous. However, by this time, I had become a priest, and had recently preached a sermon on the importance, and value, of forgiveness. I privately contacted a classmate who knew the quarterback, and said, “You will not believe who sent me a friend request on Facebook—the person who made my life in high school really miserable. Do you think I should just tell him to go get lost?” My friend said, “Aren’t you kind of in the forgiveness business? He has not had an easy life—two bad marriages, raised his only child after his second wife died of an overdose, worked as a police commander in our home town for 30 years. Finally married the right wife not too long ago. How about cutting him some slack?”

So...I did. I accepted the friend request, and he has become one of my most frequent contacts. I can say we are friends. Now: did he ever ask my forgiveness? No, but there have been comments that I can tell have been intended in that direction.

Does it make any difference if someone who has hurt or offended you asks for forgiveness? No, it does not. The forgiveness is a foregone conclusion because that is what Jesus asks of people who choose to follow him. It does not mean that we let people hurt us. It does mean that we let God be God. And this is also a way in which, as our psalm today says, we can bless the Lord. We tend to think of blessings as a one-way street. God blesses us...that’s the deal, isn’t it? However, in our relationship with God, our recognition of his blessings (benefits are “blessing deeds”) makes the love an exchange, a two-way street. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. We give attention to God, and God blesses us. This is a merciful exchange.

In the Gospel lesson, we learn that the servant who doesn’t forgive his fellow servant is handed over to be tortured until he pays his debt. The failure to forgive is a way of torturing oneself. As one bit of popular wisdom has it, “The failure to forgive is like swallowing poison and expecting whoever you are angry with to die.” The memory of whatever we have not forgiven comes to us over and over again, and it is like dying over and over again.

Paul asks, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or your sister...for we will all stand before the judgment of God...so then, each of us will be accountable to the Lord.” If we hold others accountable to us for their failures, mistakes, or unkindnesses, we are, in a sense, putting ourselves in the place of God. The most remarkable freedom comes when we realize that we can let go of whatever we have not forgiven. The joy of releasing that burden is unforgettable.

We think that in not forgiving someone, we are holding them accountable for whatever they have done to hurt or offend us. But we are the ones imprisoned. This time in which we may feel imprisoned by the limitations of the pandemic, and the loss of freedom of movement that we took for granted, is a wonderful time to grant ourselves the inner freedom of letting go of whatever has held us captive, as we forgive others. The realization that we have been doing God’s job for God, and the permission to stop it, is true inner freedom. Let go, and let God, the 12-Step programs tell us. What a great idea.

AMEN.