

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 18:21-35

Genesis 50:15-21

Psalm 103:1-13

Romans 14:1-12

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The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Did Jesus get angry? He absolutely did.

I love this fact about Jesus. I love this fact about our faith. Why? Because I think too many times when we talk about forgiveness or about Christian love, we forget that these emotions, these actions of forgiveness and love aren't passive and they aren't silent to injustice or pain or sin. They are, instead, some of the most dynamic expressions of faith that we have.

And sometimes, out of our reaction to injustice, pain, or sin, anger is what emerges. But, when Jesus expresses anger...when he cleanses the temple and turns over tables, when he calls out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders for oppressing the poor, when he admonishes the disciples for not caring for those in their midst, he is reacting out of his desire for these people to do better, to change, to amend their ways.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus even tells the parable of the king who gets angry at his servant, the king who had just forgiven his servant of his debts and then the servant fails to forgive someone else. The servant is eager to accept forgiveness but he is unwilling to amend his own behavior. The anger Jesus expresses and that the king in our parable expresses is what we might call righteous anger. The kind of anger that emerges from a broken heart.

It's a broken heart over continued injustice. It's a broken heart over abuse. It's a broken heart over the unrepentant. It's the broken heart over harm that is inflicted time and time again.

And, so this morning, as we journey into our texts that allow us to wrestle with the complexity of forgiveness, I first want to start with this idea of righteous anger. Because forgiveness is one of those things that we tend to throw around as Christians...and frankly, our Gospel text about forgiving 7 times 70 times only complicates the issues if we take it at face value.

I have often heard this text read as a justification for turning the other cheek, over and over again. No matter what abuse or hate or hurtful behavior comes your way. Just keep forgiving we are told, as many times as it takes,...as if that is the highest form of Christian love.

Yet, if forgiveness was that shallow, or that simple, would Jesus have gotten angry? And, how are we to understand his anger in light of our text from Matthew? What does it take to truly forgive?

I want to share with you an outline of forgiveness from one of my favorite Christian writers, Debie Thomas.<sup>1</sup>

The first thing she points out is that **forgiveness is not denial**. She writes,

*"Forgiveness isn't pretending that an offense doesn't matter, or that a wound doesn't hurt, or that Christianity requires us to forget past harms and "let bygones be bygones." Forgiveness isn't acting as if things don't have to change, or assuming that because God is merciful, God isn't grieved and angered by injustice.*

*On the contrary, the starting line of forgiveness is the acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Of harm. Of real and profound violation. Whenever we talk about the need for forgiveness, we must begin by recognizing and naming the extent of the brokenness."*

So, we start by taking accountability if we have harmed someone. We confess.

Second, **forgiveness is not a detour or a shortcut**. Thomas states,

*"Forgiveness in the Christian tradition isn't a palliative; it works hand-in-hand with the arduous work of repentance and transformation. In other words, there is nothing godly about responding to evil with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity."*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called passive acceptance or complicity "cheap grace." It's the easy way out. Instead, true forgiveness when given opens the possibility for true repentance and transformation on the part of the offender.

Lastly, **forgiveness is not synonymous with healing or reconciliation**.

This is a tough one. Just because we may offer forgiveness doesn't mean that the work of reconciliation happens. Sometimes, it doesn't. But, that doesn't diminish the importance of the act of forgiveness. It simply means that we may not get the reunion or the healing between parties that we had hoped for. In those moments, the best we can do, if we have been hurt is to forgive from our heart and move on.

Jesus never expected anyone to stay in an abusive relationship or to allow patterns of hate or betrayal or oppression to continue. That's not forgiveness. He didn't expect anyone to remain a victim in silence.

Instead, forgiveness is ultimately a beginning, an opportunity for healing. It's radical and bold. It speaks up and stands up. Forgiveness doesn't erase consequences and it doesn't erase the hard work of reconciliation. But, it does show us a path forward.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2748>

So, maybe forgiveness does at times start with righteous anger. Of calling out the harm we have experienced or the harm we have witnessed. Maybe it starts with a broken heart. And, from the brokenness the possibility emerges. The possibility for the offender to take accountability, to confess. The possibility for forgiveness to be offered. And then the possibility to change. That's restorative justice. That's restorative love.

I want to close with a prayer from a Jewish writer that I have been reading lately. I hope it will be meaningful to you in whatever way you may be seeking healing and forgiveness and reconciliation this morning.

**Repentance Inside** by Alden Solovy<sup>2</sup>

This I confess:

I have taken my transgressions with me,  
 Carrying them year-by-year into my hours and days,  
 My lapses of conscience  
 And indiscretion with words,  
 My petty judgments  
 And my vanity,  
 Clinging to grief and fear, anger and shame,  
 Clinging to excuses and to old habits.  
 I've felt the light of heaven,  
 Signs and wonders in my own life,  
 And still will not surrender to holiness and light.

G-d of redemption,  
 With Your loving and guiding hand  
 Repentance in prayer is easy.  
 Repentance inside,  
 Leaving my faults and offenses behind,  
 Is a struggle.

In Your wisdom You have given me this choice:  
 To live today as I lived yesterday,  
 Or to set my life free to love You,  
 To love Your people,  
 And to love myself.

G-d of forgiveness, help me to leave my transgressions behind,  
 To hear Your voice,  
 To accept Your guidance,  
 And to see the miracles in each new day.

<sup>2</sup> <http://tobendlight.com/2013/09/repentance-inside/>