

The 7th Sunday after Epiphany (C)
February 24, 2019
Text: Luke 6:27-38

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I know someone who cringes every time every time she hears, “Love your enemies... and pray for those who abuse you.” When she hears about turning the other cheek in church, she’s tempted to just get up and leave, although usually she just zones out and doesn’t listen—because if she listens, all she hears is judgment and condemnation. She was in an abusive marriage for years, and her pastor told her that divorce was a sin and she had to submit to her husband. It was her duty to go back and forgive him and make things right. It wasn’t until her husband was arrested for hitting their daughter that she finally made the decision to get out and not look back. She thinks of the advice she got from her church as not just oppressive, but cruel. It makes her want to cry and scream for those lost years, when she wanted to leave, but her fundamentalist church told her she couldn’t.

There’s a man named Ben Bosinger. He and his siblings grew up in total fear of their father, who was an angry and violent man. Ben says his father beat him and his siblings, humiliated them and hurt them. Ben hated his father, but grew up to become just like him—angry and violent. The poison he had absorbed in his early life made him bitter, resentful and deeply unhappy. Even though everyone around him told him he needed to forgive, that the only way out of his misery was to forgive his dad, he held on—until the day he visited his dad, and he saw only a flawed, weak, old man. Ben said he simply forgave him. And it was like a huge boulder was lifted from his chest. He felt he could finally breathe again. He felt lighter, and “the world seemed a more hopeful place.” For Ben, granting forgiveness was incredibly freeing. It brought a very personal and profound liberation. [Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, pp. 131-132.]

And it seems to me that, in the stories of these two people, we get a glimpse of the power and possibility and danger of Jesus’ words about loving your enemies, doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse you, and praying for those who abuse you—about not judging, not condemning, and instead forgiving. As these surprising, shocking, unsettling words have been handed down in the church through the generations, they have helped some believers experience a kind of freedom and hope that has given insight and courage to become a force for compassion and bring change to relationships. And these very same words have also been used to cause incredible harm and pain to believers who’ve experienced them as nothing more than a cruel demand.

So if we’re going to listen to Jesus, it seems imperative to me that we do so in a way that leads to freedom and liberation, not judgment and condemnation. And that means paying careful attention to what forgiveness is, and what it is not. Forgiveness is not easy. It requires true inner strength and courage to be able to forgive. Forgiveness also doesn’t happen automatically. It’s a process, and may take years and years. No one else can impose a timeline on you and tell you when you’re ready to forgive. Forgiveness doesn’t mean forgetting about the wrong that has been done, or pretending it was somehow OK,

and it certainly doesn't mean that the offender shouldn't experience any consequences for what they've done. Instead, forgiveness is about discovering the path that leads to healing, the path that sets us free from the grip of the past, the path that leads to life instead of death.

The human family has been on the path that leads toward death for a long time now, for as long as anyone can recall. When we are hurt, we want to strike back. We want revenge. And that cycle of hurt and retaliation goes around and around. It feeds on itself, and can only lead to more hurt and retaliation. But when Jesus calls us to live generously, with open hearts, to act with forgiveness, and without judging and condemning others, he is inviting us to become part of God's work of healing for the human family, part of a future that isn't simply more of the same. Jesus calls us to disengage from retaliation and judging and condemning, and instead recognize every person as loved by God, including those we would identify as enemies, to see everyone with eyes of compassion.

The former Anglican Archbishop of South Africa, Desmond Tutu, has written a book, together with his daughter Mpho Tutu, called *The Book of Forgiving*. It's a book that grew out of his experience with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which dealt with South Africa's terrible legacy of racism and violence under its white-controlled apartheid government. Many people believe that the only reason South Africa didn't explode in an orgy of retaliation and killing after the end of apartheid was that, through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the country chose forgiveness and healing. In this book, bishop Tutu and his daughter weave together their own stories of loss and grief, of violence and hurt, together with the stories of other people from around the world, and they create something like a roadmap for following the way of forgiveness. They describe four essential steps toward forgiveness.

The first step is telling your story, telling the truth about what happened—how you were wronged, how you were hurt. Forgiveness can't start with pretending, or secrets. Start with telling a close friend, a loved one, someone you trust to provide a safe place for telling your story. You may need to tell your story many times. You might consider telling the person who hurt you, or writing a letter to them—although there are no guarantees about whether they will acknowledge what they did. One of the things that happens when you tell your story is accepting that whatever happened cannot be changed or undone.

The second step is naming the hurt, which means identifying the feelings generated by what happened to you—feelings of loss, feelings of grief. You need to be able to share with someone who can really listen, who won't try to fix you or minimize your pain or offer advice. When you name the hurt, you are accepting your own vulnerability.

The third step is granting forgiveness, which requires recognizing the humanity we share with the person who hurt us. Bishop Tutu says, "We are all fragile, vulnerable, flawed human beings." And when we recognize that about ourselves and the person who hurt us, it becomes possible to let go of the burden of hating them or resenting them or wishing ill

toward them. When we can let go of that burden, we change our own story, so that we are no longer a victim, but instead the hero of the story. We become the one who has struggled through to find the way to freedom. Instead of seeing ourselves as someone who was wronged or mistreated, we become someone strong enough to choose the way of empathy and compassion, someone who chose life rather than death.

The final step is renewing or releasing the relationship. After forgiving, you may find a relationship is ready to begin a new chapter. Or you may choose to not deal with that person again. It's up to you. If you choose to renew the relationship, you'll tell the person who hurt you what you need—whether it's an apology, or an explanation, or something else. And if you choose to release the relationship, you can move ahead, but free from being a victim.

Jesus' word about loving our enemies, praying for those who hurt us, forgiving those who have done us wrong—I don't think it's helpful to think of it as a requirement, a demand. It is an invitation to follow Jesus in his way of life, which turns out to be a way of life for more than only individual relationships. Jesus' way of compassion and generosity and forgiveness is about changing the world, giving birth to the reign of God. Jesus invites us to take part in an act of new creation, to join our efforts with God's to create a new world and a new future for the human family! Like any creative process, it is sometimes painful. But really, can it be more painful than the cycle of hurt and retaliation that becomes a prison for everyone? Jesus' way of love for enemies, and praying for those who hurt us, and forgiving those who harm us—Jesus' way finally leads to new life, the life of freedom we most deeply long for. Thanks be to God. Amen.