

Faith Mennonite Church
September 14, 2008

Trusting in Forgiveness

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-33

“Forgiveness isn’t natural,” concluded the North Minneapolis group that Hermann Weinlick meets with to discuss the lectionary scriptures. There’s little in our culture that encourages it. We grow accustomed to reading quotes from families of victims, following a sentencing of death or life imprisonment, that now the family can find some peace. When there’s a violation most people want to exact some form of payment; many wish to inflict the pain that their loved one—and they too—have suffered.

Since the United States is considered by many to be a “Christian” nation, one might conclude from statistics on prison and executions that most Christians don’t believe in forgiveness either. According to Wikipedia,

The United States has the highest documented incarceration rate, and total documented prison population in the world. As of year-end 2006, a record 7.2 million people were behind bars, on probation or on parole. Of the total, 2.2 million were incarcerated. More than 1 in 100 American adults were incarcerated at the start of 2008. The People’s Republic of China ranks second with 1.5 million, despite having over four times the population of the US. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prisons_in_the_United_States, September 12, 2008]

So why is forgiveness so unnatural? Why is it so hard to forgive? Perhaps because people haven’t received forgiveness, or perhaps they haven’t fully trusted it to be real even when it’s offered. Take the story of Joseph and his brothers, for instance. The few verses we read this morning from the final chapter of Genesis is the end of a rather long and complicated tale of family conflict. Joseph and his brothers had three mother’s, Rachel and Leah, plus Leah’s servant Zilpah. Joseph and his youngest brother, Benjamin, were the sons of Rachel, Jacob’s favored wife, and thus these were his favored sons. The sons of Leah and Zilpah, who were older, resented their father’s favoritism. As youth, they plotted against Joseph and when they had an opportunity, they decided to sell him to some traveling traders headed to Egypt. They reported to their father that a wild animal had killed him.

The brothers never imagined that their fortunes would turn and that they’d someday encounter their brother Joseph again. They no doubt began to believe the lie they told their father. After a rough start in Egypt, Joseph rose in the ranks of one of the Pharaohs, and was an administrator over all of Egypt. In response to a dream of impending famine he developed a plan of warehousing food. As the famine intensified, word spread to neighboring countries that there was food in Egypt. Joseph’s brothers decided to go to Egypt to purchase food. Unbeknownst to them, the person they needed to deal with in the purchase of grain was their brother. While he recognized them, they did not recognize him. He played an elaborate game that tested their

honesty and loyalty, and when they stood the test, he finally revealed himself to them, and brought his entire family to Egypt where his father lived out his final days.

Even though Joseph showed visible signs of emotion, wailing and crying, when he was reunited with his brothers, and even though he provided land in Egypt for all of them, they couldn't let go of their guilt. Seventeen years later, when their father died, they were afraid and wondered if Joseph would finally seek revenge. They asked for forgiveness, appealing to their father's deathbed words, asking Joseph to forgive his brothers for their crime.

Rather than speak words of forgiveness, Joseph simply cried. Perhaps he was sad that they didn't trust him. Perhaps he was sad that after all the year *they* were the ones suffering from their crime, not him. But still they hedged, offering themselves as his servants, rather than believing that they could be equals, brothers.

Joseph was able to see the big picture. He did not dwell on what he had suffered, but rather on what God had done, turning harmful intentions into goodness and provision. We don't know if his brothers were ever able to do the same, to trust in his reassuring words, "Do not fear."

I wonder if fear got in the way of the indebted servant in Jesus' parable that Matthew places in the chapter where he addresses love and forgiveness. This man was in deep doo-doo. Deeper in many ways than all of Joseph's brothers combined. One talent was worth 15 years' wages as a laborer, and somehow he racked up a debt of 10,000 talents. I mean, this is like *national*, not personal debt.

Now the king surely knows that this man can *never* pay the money back, so he figures let's liquidate the property he has and sell him and his family, so we get a little return. But the man pleads... "Please...have patience, I'll pay you everything." Something moved the king to pity and he changed his mind and simply erased the debt. Select all; delete. It's gone. Finished.

For the king it was finished. But for the man? It seems he didn't understand what the king meant. Maybe he just needed more time for it to sink in. Or maybe he thought it couldn't be real. Kings don't just erase debts. Maybe fear started creeping in and he thought, I've got to work to pay at least some of this back...

And about then he chances upon a fellow slave, who happens to owe him some money. Pretty insignificant, really, in comparison to his own: 100 denarii—a third of a year's wages. This guy *could* have paid his debt back, but the first slave was still caught in fear: I need *everything* I can get my hands on in case the King changes his mind.

When word gets back to the king that the man he just forgave this monumental debt has hauled someone else into jail, he's incredulous and furious: "You wicked slave! Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?"

But forgiveness isn't natural ... sometimes it's too much to accept or trust.

So how *do* we receive forgiveness and how do we create a *culture* of forgiveness?

We begin by trusting that God is a God of love. That God's love is self-giving, willing to face death, as Jesus did, rather than selling us off or requiring that we make amends for

everything we do wrong. We trust that we were created in love and named as “beloved” by our creator. And each time we notice an impulse to seek revenge or wish another harm, we check those thoughts with the reminder of the love we’ve received.

When we do this as a church we begin to create that culture of forgiveness. That’s why the Amish community in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, could shock the nation with their almost instant response of forgiveness for the family of the man who had cruelly slain their innocents. It wasn’t that they didn’t value those lives or didn’t grieve the tragic and profound loss. But as a community they trusted in the love of God, just as their martyred 15th century Anabaptist ancestors had done.

During World War I, my grandfather owned a hardware store in a small town settled by Mennonites in rural northern Michigan. The Mennonite Church was the only church in town and church members were active in civic life. But when they refused to participate in military service when the US joined the war, some in the community could not comprehend their actions or beliefs. A few men in the town plotted to burn the Mennonite church and the hardware store, knowing it would cause a large explosion because the store sold dynamite, for clearing land. Although that plan to burn the store was thwarted, they were successful in setting the church on fire one night and it burned to the ground.

In the days that followed, church leaders wondered if they should press charges. Some set out on a car trip to seek legal counsel, but when they had three flat tires before they’d gotten half way to their destination, they decided God was telling them to go back home. So they returned, rebuilt their church, and never spoke words of anger or criticism against those who had perpetrated this act of terror. At least one of the perpetrators later joined the church.

At the national and international level, truth commissions, in countries such as South Africa and Argentina where government-sponsored terror decimated lives and communities, have been one step toward creating a culture of forgiveness. These commissions do not gloss over the pain, but call people to accountability without seeking revenge and continuing the cycle of violence.

We all have a part to play in the story of forgiveness. Some of us may still be struggling to believe that we are worthy of forgiveness. Some of us may be struggling to offer forgiveness. Some of us may be grieving for friends or family members who haven’t yet found the liberation of forgiveness. And some of us may be seeking God’s strength to create the culture of forgiveness in our families, in this church, and in our neighborhoods and work places. Some of us have personal connections to places, like Colombia or Palestine, where forgiveness is so desperately needed.

So Candace is going to join me this morning in offering anointing with oil, the Christian symbol of healing and wholeness, to any of you who seek forgiveness in your own life or for the lives of others. During the next hymn, sung by an ensemble, you may come to front or back, in silence or speaking a request, and receive a blessing of oil.

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