

March 17, 2019
Second Sunday of Lent
Matthew 18:15-35

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“Reconciliation, Forgiveness, and Justice”

A strange thing happened about a week and a half ago now. On a cold Wednesday evening a small group of us gathered right here in silence at the front of the sanctuary. It was dark, we laid this massive cross on the steps, and we encircled it with several candles. Karla made the space beautiful, Karen played the viola, Jenny played the flute, and Sandy played the piano. It was a contemplative and meditative service – Miriam was the cantor who led us in singing. None of that is very strange, of course. What was strange is that before the service I went out behind the church building and burned the palm branches from last Palm Sunday, and I placed the ashes in a small bowl with a little oil. Toward the end of the service on Wednesday I invited people to come up to the cross to receive “the imposition of ashes,” a time when I smear ashes on foreheads of people.

Ash Wednesday is not a traditional practice in most Mennonite churches, but it’s a powerful practice, and one that I see as consistent with the basic elements of our Anabaptist tradition. The words spoken upon the imposition of the ashes: “Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return,” remind us of our creatureliness, our mortality, and our finitude. The use of ashes remind us, too, of the power of Sin and Death and our own complicity in the perpetuation of Sin and Death in the world – but perhaps most importantly, the ashes point us to the *crucifixion*, reminding us of God’s intimate solidarity with us in life and in death – Jesus and his movement to crucifixion.

Reflecting on the meaning of Ash Wednesday for our Anabaptist faith, the symbol of ashes brought to mind the many gruesome images depicted in the *Martyrs Mirror*, a significant text of our tradition. For those of you who are new to Anabaptism and the Mennonite Church, the *Martyrs Mirror* is a massive collection of names and stories often accompanied with horrendous images of martyrs being tortured or killed. Central to Anabaptist and Mennonite faith is the belief that in some way these people who have been killed on account of their faith, from the first century through the sixteenth century, are our spiritual ancestors. They are not so much our “saints,” as say in the Roman Catholic tradition, but ordinary people demonstrating their profound commitment, single-mindedness, and faithfulness to Jesus Christ *alone* above any and every authority on earth.

Several of the early Anabaptists were burned to death by the established powers of the age on account of their faith. This historical memory sheds a new dimension on the meaning of ashes on Ash Wednesday – it points us to the *sacrificial* element of our common faith – in addition to mortality and our sinfulness, ashes signify the *costs* of discipleship. One particularly gruesome image sits in the church office: the image of Anneken Hendriks of Friesland, who was taken prisoner by the city officials of Amsterdam and because, we are told, she held fast to her faith she was severely tortured and finally executed on October 27, 1571, refusing to give up the names of her fellow Anabaptists. Tied to a ladder with a rope around her waist, her mouth filled with gunpowder, she is depicted with her eyes looking up to the sky, hands clasped in prayer, as two men prepare to push her into a raging fire with smoke billowing up high into the air. Her dress disheveled and her body thin as can be, she is portrayed as a poor peasant woman who could not read or write – and in the background we see the people gathered in the town square, along with armed soldiers and a man dressed in the garments of a politician.

So, too, our scripture passage for today, on this Second Sunday of Lent, is one that has been important in the history of Anabaptism, marking for us one of the scriptural bases for some of our core commitments: reconciliation and forgiveness, particularly within the context of our shared faith. Here, just before Jesus begins his movement toward Jerusalem in the Gospel of Matthew, toward the crucifixion, he provides his followers with a set of guidelines, we might say, about how the church is to live in relation to one another.

While so many early Anabaptists were killed for their faith and commitments, remarkably they often still maintained the importance of this call to reconciliation and forgiveness. As a people outlawed and often condemned to death for heresy, treachery, and the refusal to pledge loyalty to the church or the state, the early Anabaptists were not viewed as particularly “peaceful” people – nor did it seem as though they were very interested in “reconciliation,” at least not with the established church or with the state. You will sometimes hear this idea that Anabaptism represented a “third way,” a middle-ground between Catholics and Protestants, but that is only a half-truth. More accurately, Anabaptists were viewed as disruptive heretics, like a swarm of hornets, not peaceful folk seeking reconciliation. And yet, despite this perception, the early Anabaptists took very seriously the need for reconciliation, especially within their own communities of faith. This commitment to reconciliation is reflected in the history of the practice of baptism in Mennonite churches, wherein *reconciliation, forgiveness, and the restoration* of relationships between members of the congregation has often been seen as a *precondition* to the practice of communion, the fellowship around the Lord’s Supper. If I am not right with my neighbor, Anabaptists have believed, it is not appropriate for me to share in communion with them – for to do so would be to participate in a serious kind of dishonesty, untruthfulness, both in relation to one another and to Christ. The practice of seeking reconciliation with the neighbor as a precondition for communion gets at the importance Anabaptists have historically placed on truthfulness, community accountability, as well as restorative and just relationships more generally.

Of course, this commitment has not been without its problems, as Anabaptist communities have too often replicated the very thing we ourselves have suffered under the hands of the established church and state, namely, condemnation and rejection of the perceived “heretics” in our midst. Through the use of the ban, excommunication, other acts of church discipline, or today through protracted “discernment processes” about the inclusion of LGBTQ people in the church, Anabaptist communities have found plenty of our own reasons and mechanisms for the exclusion of others and indeed violence against others. After all, “if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (18:17). Reconciliation and forgiveness, it would seem, has its limits, and we are all too ready to establish them, are we not? But lest we forget: Jesus ate with tax collectors and extended mercy to Gentiles. With Peter, perhaps, we find ourselves asking, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Our passage today closes not with a saying about human behavior, but with a parable of the kingdom of heaven. What is suggested by the parable is that forgiveness is not simply a function of ethical obligation; forgiveness is instead a *concrete expression* of the kingdom of heaven within the fabric of community and social relationships. The parable contains two figures – a king and a slave. Although the king is the first character mentioned in the story, the slave is really the main character. The narrator follows the slave from despair, to promise, to a situation of being far worse than he was at first. At the beginning of the story, the slave’s debt is larger than he could ever hope to repay, so he pleads for additional time in an act of desperation. The king responds by releasing and forgiving him,

canceling the entire debt. Then, the slave goes off and sees another slave and *demand*s that he now repay a debt owed to him – this time, the slave is much *harsher* in his demands than before. He seizes his fellow slave by the throat demanding repayment. The plea of the one who has been grabbed by the throat echoes the earlier plea to the king. But now, rather than releasing and forgiving his fellow slave from debt, he denies even the request for additional time to repay a small debt. When the king hears of this he responds in a way that makes the point of the parable clear: because the slave has not shown mercy, his own debt is *reinstated* and he is imprisoned without hope of release.

The point of the story is not so much to describe a general rule – that people say in all circumstances should forgive one another so as to reflect God’s infinite mercy; nor is the point that an external authority, the king (or, in our time the state or a judge) should be in charge of meting out rewards and punishments. The point of the parable is rather to describe the consequences of choosing to live according to the old order that is passing away – choosing to live according to a world that is maintained by unending cycles of debts and obligations – rather than living in light of the new order that is to come, that is, the kingdom of heaven, which is characterized by reconciliation, forgiveness, and release.

When we are willing to *receive forgiveness* but not forgive others in turn, we effectively, deny the new economy of mercy that is the hallmark of the kingdom of heaven on earth. When we *resist* the gift and the obligation that comes with release and forgiveness, when we refuse to extend release and forgiveness to others as it has been offered to us, we end up *excluding ourselves* from the mercy and liberation of the kingdom of heaven.

For some of us, perhaps even most of us here, it is difficult to tell the story of our lives without talking about our broken relationships – many of us live with unresolved conflict, many of us have been in the position of both the offender and the offended, sometimes in both positions at once! And we know how difficult it can be to do the hard work of reconciliation, release, forgiveness, and restoration. Perhaps Lent is a time for reflecting on the times that mercy and forgiveness have been extended to us, and how we might extend mercy and forgiveness to others.

Of course, social dynamics and the use and abuse of power often play a part in the brokenness of our relationships, complexifying easy resolutions to problems. These dynamics play themselves out in the personal and social arenas of our lives, and they raise for us the question of the limits of calls to reconciliation and forgiveness. For example, when a man abuses a woman, the call to “forgiveness” can often further the conditions that create and sustain violence against women; at the social level, when white Americans seek “reconciliation” with black Americans without, say, a serious conversation about *reparations*, we know that talk of “reconciliation” is cheap, masking the history of structural violence and power. In the wake of the attack on Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, NZ, we see yet again the violent consequences of white supremacy and Islamophobia. What might it look like to build trust and restore relationships? Restorative justice work and programs and workshops through organizations like MN Peacebuilding have opened up for us new opportunities for engagement with the difficult work of reconciliation, and the need to recognize the reality of trauma and its effects as well as the possibility of transformation. Efforts to return the land to indigenous people are part of that difficult work that is so necessary on the part of the offender to seek after forgiveness and reconciliation with the offended. At a recent event at the East Side Freedom Library on the East Side of St. Paul, I heard a woman remark that changing the name of Lake Calhoun to Bde Maka Ska is not enough to right the historical wrong of land theft – a more transformative and restorative approach might begin with returning the land and the water to the

Dakota people. So, too, grassroots movements, often led by people of color, calling for the abolition of the police and prisons in this country creatively ask after *alternative* ways of addressing violence in our communities, encouraging us to take a much deeper look at how racism and gender oppression structures our laws and institutions. These abolitionists encourage us to dream anew, to envision a justice system based not in retribution and vengeance and militarism but in reparation and reconciliation – to envision, that is, a broad-scale de-militarization of our society. In so doing, these social movements unwittingly, perhaps, take seriously Jesus’s words in Matthew 18. And it should come as no surprise that Anabaptists and Mennonites have been at the forefront of these movements, alongside other radicals. Release, forgiveness, reconciliation within the context of *restorative* and *reparative* work for justice – these are the marks of the kingdom of heaven – as a community of faith in the Anabaptist tradition it is into this new order that we are given to live and to do the difficult work of reconciliation, forgiveness, and justice in our personal lives and in our social lives. May we take the time to reflect and act on this calling as we enter into this season of Lent. AMEN.