

Proper 19-A  
September 17, 2017  
St. John's Cathedral

Years ago when I was doing a lot of children's sermons, I puzzled for a while about how to approach today's gospel about forgiveness. About forgiving again and again. The translation of the gospel said to forgive seventy times seven (today, in a different translation, we heard seventy-seven times). So I got a three-pound coffee can and 490 pinto beans, sat down with the kids and had them take turns counting that number beans that they put in the can while we talked about forgiveness. That pile of beans represented a lot of forgiveness. So did 77. Frankly, sometimes even one act of forgiveness can seem like a lot.

But we are called to forgive. We can do that because we are a people who are forgiven -- by God. And so when we forgive, we reach deep and try to act god-like in the best sort of way. Sometimes it takes a bit of work and sometimes it comes easily. But when we can't or won't forgive, sometimes it feels like a heavy weight.

Today's gospel offers a fairly complicated story about forgiveness in which a slave (probably one in the upper-tier of slaves) owes the king a debt. The king demands he pay. The slave asks for the king's patience, but can't come up with the money right away. And so the king forgives the debt.

We would probably assume his gratitude for that mercy (which kept his family from being sold to another slave owner) would result in his offering mercy and forgiveness to someone else. But that is not the case. When a fellow slave is indebted to him, he demands payment and when the other slave can't pay, he has

him thrown into prison. The first slave's lack of mercy does not go unnoticed by the king and there are consequences. Let's just say this does not go well for the first slave.

We have to remember that parables are stories that really open up a theme for us. They are not allegories where we have to figure out who every character stands for or nail down every detail. These are pithy stories that are designed to open our minds and hearts to God.

And this one really gets us thinking about both God's forgiveness and our call to forgive.

The inability to forgive – or reconcile with someone – is often at center stage both in our personal relationships and in the wider world. There is a lot of hurt when forgiveness is withheld. But it happens to just about everyone. I know that 've nursed some grudges over the years. After many years of offering pastoral care, I'd say that this is the issue that most often surfaces in pastoral conversations. Sometimes those unreconciled hurts, those failures forgive simply disrupt our lives and become a dull ache. A weight that is sort of like carrying a bowling ball around all day , or wearing a backpack full of rocks.

Shortly after coming to Spokane, I was asked to go down to Deaconess hospital where a woman I knew from a former parish was dying. I visited with her family and offered a prayer at this woman's bedside. She motioned for me to come a little closer so she could tell me something. What she said was that she was still really mad about something that had happened years ago at our former parish.

I could tell she did not want counsel or absolution. She just wanted to stay angry about that. She wanted to take it to the grave with her.

I don't want to go to my grave carrying that kind of a load. I try work on those issues by trying to pray for people who have hurt me – or simply trying to hand those things over to God who is infinitely more capable of taking the lead than I am. I try to recall that I am a person who is forgiven and attempt to live into that.

But there is so much in our own lives and in our world that is simmering, threatening to boil over into a mess of retribution, revenge, anger or depression. Stuff that is waiting to be forgiven so that life can go on. Stuff that is both petty and profound. Stuff that disrupts the life of communities, whether those communities are churches or neighborhoods or nations. In the aftermath of a school shooting in our community this past week – in the midst of the jagged emotions, sadness, fear and puzzlement, we know that forgiveness is something we will need to deal with sooner or later.

From time to time, though, we hear stories of what I like to call 'heroic forgiveness. An act of forgiveness so profound that we wonder how someone could offer it. We wonder until we remember that it is the grace of God that makes it possible.

The story that I come back to again and again is the story of Coventry Cathedral – a story that is likely familiar to you. We have this story before us here all the time because of a symbol that normally resides on the wall by the pulpit. It is a cross of nails – that will be back up there soon after being re-mounted.

In 1940, the cathedral in Coventry, England, was destroyed by the German forces during relentless bombing of that industrial city. It was a nightmare in the midst of the larger nightmare of World War II. We wonder how the people of Coventry – and the people of Coventry Cathedral – would respond to that attack that destroyed a holy place.

On Christmas Day of 1940 the Provost (like a Dean) of the cathedral declared on a national broadcast that when the war was over he would work with those who had been enemies to ‘build a kinder, more Christ-like world.’

If you have visited Coventry cathedral you have seen a spectacular, modern cathedral where the old cathedral once stood. And in a quiet spot, there is a partial wall of the old cathedral – all that remains of the building today -- with these simple words inscribed: Father, forgive. Inside the cathedral on the high altar there is a cross made with large nails from the beams of the original cathedral. Nails that were dug out of the ruins of the blast and fire. Our own cross of nails is replica of that.

Coventry Cathedral has taken on the work of global reconciliation as part of its ministry and a center there is committed to help others seek reconciliation and offer forgiveness. Our own fireside groups here at the cathedral seek to live into that call to reconciliation.

What an incredible kind of work to undertake. We’re living in a world that seems increasingly to be ruled by violence, warfare, retribution, and fear. And we wonder where the voices of reason and reconciliation may come from.

Last week we observed the 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary of September 11, 2001 – remembering the horrific acts of terror that leveled the World Trade Center, severely damaged the Pentagon and caused an additional fatal plane crash in Pennsylvania. Some 2,700 people lost their lives in that series of unthinkable events. Our nation continues to mourn. Some of our most basic (but not best) instincts turned to retribution after those attacks. But we also heard other voices.

That week we heard these prophetic words from Bishop Nathan Baxter, then the dean of Washington Cathedral: “As we act, let us not become the evil that we deplore.” .

How do we get to ‘Father, forgive,’ either at the level of our personal hurts or a national crisis? How do we come to healing and peace? Maybe one bean at a time. One act of forgiveness at a time.