



“Clinging to the Cuts”
Scripture – Matthew 18:21-35
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, September 17, 2017

Linda discovered that a friend of hers, a woman she had worked with for 15 years, said some unkind things about her to a mutual friend. The words cut deeply. She felt betrayed. Linda called the woman so they could get together and talk about it, but the woman refused to admit any wrongdoing. They cut off contact and Linda decided, “That’s it. We are finished.”

Except that they weren’t finished, because as Linda said, “The scene of our last meeting kept replaying in my mind. I could hear us argue. I would think of things I wished I had said that would have proven her words to be untrue. I compiled lists in my head of all the times I felt she had hurt me in the past, and I could hear myself developing a case. Over the next few months, I would tell the people closest to me about the incident and invariably I would get the support that I wanted – which was ‘What? She said that! How awful! You are right to be upset.’”

Linda said, “So why didn’t I feel better? I kept thinking, *if only she would say she was sorry, I would forgive her in a heartbeat...* But she was not going to say “Sorry,” so I was never going to have a chance to be munificent, and say to her “I forgive you.” In the meantime, Linda became annoyed with how much time and how much space in her head these imaginary conversations were consuming.”¹

Can you think of someone who has hurt you? Someone you are having a hard time forgiving? Do you have conversations in your mind about what you should have said *then* and what you would like to say *now*?

Have you ever found yourself clinging to the cuts someone inflicted? Have you yearned to strike back with a clever comment that will hurt the other person as much as he/she hurt you? It is natural to hope that the scales will be evened one day when you will strike them with a blow that is as damaging as the one they landed on you. Instead of “Do to others as you would have them do to you,” “Do to others as they have done to you.”

Despite the desire to see the other pay a price for the harm they have caused, some put the brakes on revenge. For these folks, rather than revenge, they choose avoidance. They delete the person from their phone and email contacts, and avoid social settings where they might run into the other.

As people who follow the way of Jesus, we know we are supposed to forgive; but it can be so difficult.

In today's reading, Peter goes to Jesus with a problem. He is making a valiant effort to live up to the standards of Jesus, but one has tied him in knots. The same one that most of us find vexing – forgiving someone who has harmed us.

Someone has hurt Peter. Has he slandered Peter? Double-crossed him? Failed to repay a debt? We do not know. We only know that someone has mistreated Peter; Peter has forgiven him, and the person has harmed Peter again. And again. And again.

Peter has been magnanimous, forgiving him numerous times; perhaps as many as five or six. We can hear the exasperation in Peter's voice as he says, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Had baseball been invented by the first century, I suspect Peter would have said, "Lord, three strikes and you are out. Right?" That's the standard that many of us use. However, Jesus responds with words that set the bar out of sight: "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

While Peter is reeling from this exorbitant demand, Jesus tells a parable. A king summoned his servants to settle his accounts with them. Hearing that one servant owed him ten thousand talents – this is like saying 100,000 shares of Apple stock, an amount that could never be repaid – The king ordered that the man, his wife, his children, and all his possessions be sold to recover a fraction of the debt. Hearing that his life was turning into a nightmare, the man dropped to his knees and pleaded. "Have patience with me and I will pay you back."

The king's reply is breathtaking. Despite the fact that the man could never repay such an enormous debt, the king says, "I forgive you. Debt canceled."

At this point, the parable echoes the parable of the prodigal son. You remember that the son buzzed through half of his father's wealth and did it in a way that repudiated his father. But despite the fact that he has been a scoundrel, when he drags himself home, the father celebrates his return.

If this parable from Matthew ended with the king forgiving the servant, it would spotlight the abundant love of God. However, the story does not end there. After being forgiven a monstrous sum, the servant ran into a fellow servant who owed him a paltry amount. He seized his fellow servant by the throat and demanded his money back. The man fell to his knees and begged for time to repay it.

Although this servant's plea was the same as the first servant, the answer was very different. The first servant closed his ears and closed his heart. He had his fellow debtor thrown into prison.

The parable continues as the king gets wind of what this servant has done and the king's previous compassion is replaced with anger – because God bristles at injustice. The unforgiving servant is arrested and handed over to torturers. The king's comment to the man sums things up: "Was it not necessary for you to have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?"

The parable confirms that the context within which life unfolds is God's immense love which includes a desire to forgive even the greatest debts. Our response to God's extravagant mercy toward us is not only a heartfelt thanks; it is to show mercy to others.

What does Jesus have us pray in the model prayer he gave us? "Forgive us our *debts* as we forgive our *debtors*." Every single time we say the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to forgive us, AND we pledge to forgive others. How well are you living up to the promise you are constantly making?

One of the barriers to forgiving is our personal experience. If we have not tasted mercy for harm we have inflicted, we will be reticent to forgive others. If we feel as if people have treated us harshly, or even feel as if people have been indifferent to us, it is unlikely that we will muster the desire to be merciful.

Worse is when someone has been cruel to us and left us scarred, and not only can the damage not be undone, the person is no longer around to even attempt to make amends.

You may remember the scene in *Forrest Gump* where he is walking with his girlfriend, Jenny, who has self-medicated with drugs because her father abused her when she was a child. The two come upon the dilapidated shack where she grew up.

Jenny stares at the broken down house and the evil that took place in it comes rushing back. She picks up a rock and throws it at the house. She picks up another rock and heaves it. In her rage, she bombards the house with rock after rock until she finally collapses in a heap of tears. Forrest kneels down beside her and in his simple-minded but profound words says, "Sometimes I guess there just aren't enough rocks."

The past cannot be undone, and some scars can never be fully removed. However, we can have something to say about the power they exert on us.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells of a woman who came to see him. "She was a single mother, divorced, and working to support herself and three young children. She said, 'Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?'"

Kushner answers, 'I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't; it was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he does not deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you are hurting yourself.'"²

We can allow wounds to dominate our lives or we can do the arduous work of minimizing their influence. Deepening our spiritual life can go a long way toward reducing the power of evil over us. Through prayer, reading scripture, and worshipping with the community of faith, we are constantly reminded that we are created in God's image, that we are a beloved child of God, that the love of God can heal, that God does not predestine our lives to misery, that God brings light out of darkness, and God constantly seeks to resurrect us into new people again and again.

Another thing about forgiveness. It needs to become more than simply an act we perform. It needs to become part of our emotional and spiritual make-up. Forgiveness can become a way of being – an attitude we carry toward others. It includes knowing that we are not perfect, so it is insane to expect perfection from others. A merciful person understands that people say and do things out of anger, out of jealousy, out of ignorance, out of fear, and out of their own wounded spirit.

In the sixties, when he was in college, John Lewis was a leader among African American students who played a key role in the Civil Rights Movement. A devout Christian, dedicated to nonviolence, Lewis will never forget the day he and other students were on a bus heading into Montgomery, Alabama. All of them knew it might be the final ride of their lives, because they were heading into a city that was brimming with hostile people intent on annihilating the dreams of African Americans.

As the bus drew near Montgomery, someone in the group spoke aloud what they were all thinking. There was a very real possibility that some or all of them might be murdered. Someone suggested that each of them write out a simple will.

When I was in college, the only bus rides I took were to opposing schools to play football. In the stadium the opposing team's fans screamed for our defeat, but our lives were never in danger. Win or lose, after the game, we shook hands, headed to the locker room, and then back on the bus to return to our campus. But on the bus Lewis and others were riding, each young person pulled out a sheet of notebook paper and wrote down who would receive their meager belongings should they die.

In the bus station, Lewis and a friend were caught by four young white men who beat them unconscious with baseball bats and left them lying in a pool of blood. When Lewis and his friend came to, they dragged themselves to safety. Despite the vicious attack, Lewis immediately resumed his nonviolent work.

Lewis is now in his seventies, but "a few years ago, a white man about his age walked into his office unannounced and said, 'I am one of the men who assaulted you in that bus station. I've come to seek your forgiveness. Will you forgive me?'"

What would you do if someone had nearly killed you with a baseball bat?

"Lewis stood up and embraced the man. They both wept as Lewis forgave him. Then they sat down and talked."³

As Lewis related this story to another (Parker Palmer), he gazed into the distance and said very softly, "People can change. People can change."

Forgiveness is a powerful tool we can withhold or grant.

NOTES

1. Linda Hirschhorn, "Forgiveness (5767)," *lindahirschhorn.com*, 2009.
2. Harold Kushner, "Letting Go of the Role of Victim," *Spirituality & Health*, Winter 1999, p.34.
3. Parker Palmer, "Tested by Fire," *onbeing.org*, October 29, 2014.