

“Seeing / Seen : Forgiving / Forgiven”

1 Samuel 16:6-7, 11-13

Part V of VIII in the Lenten sermon series, “Forgiveness”

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In these last few weeks, I’ve read and heard a whole lot of double speak about forgiveness. More and more, it seems like confusing jibber-jabber. Forgiveness is complicated; it is not hard to understand, but it is surprisingly easy to misunderstand. It requires confession. There is no transgression too big for the forgiveness of God. Lest I add to the confusion, I have just this: As persons created in the image of God, we are called to live in love and mercy. That’s all. End of message.

Nevertheless, I was invited here to say more. And, as Reverend Tim reminds us, God is in the nevertheless.

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Please join me in prayer: Oh God, I give thanks for everyone and everything in my life, for every good or ugly experience. For all the times I fall short in thought, word, and deed, accept my repentance. May all that we say and do today be pleasing to God. In all things, thanks be to God. Amen.

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I’ve shared this story before, but I think it’s worth repeating. Early in my chaplaincy at Nationwide Children’s Hospital, I was asked to sit with a teenager who was near the end of his life because of cancer. His mother was meeting with nurses from hospice. I knew that, but he did not. I also knew, or thought I knew, that I might be

more supportive if I could find a connection with him. I believe that when we find our one square foot of common ground, we have a beginning for relationship. So, I proceeded to ask questions to find our common ground. I was striking out. His replies were one word, if at all. Finally, he looked me straight in the eye and said, “I don’t mean to be rude, but would you please just shut up.” Ouch! I didn’t see that coming because I had not seen him.

Our scripture readings challenge us to see as God sees. In looking for a new king to replace Saul, the Lord tells Samuel, “the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” The taller, stronger sons of Jesse were not suitable, but David had the heart for the job. Journeys of the heart are among the most rugged we will ever face.

In John’s gospel, Jesus didn’t argue about the cause of the man’s blindness. He dismissed the historic belief that suffering is caused by sin. Indeed, he restored the man’s sight, but the real miracle was what he did throughout his ministry – he altered the status quo. He challenged the pharisees to examine their assumptions. Jesus said that those who think that they know it all, who are unaware of their own blindness, they are truly blind and need help, but those who realize their weaknesses can become strong. Those who realize their own blindness learn to see, and those who realize their own sin can forgive and be forgiven. The pharisees were experts in Jewish law and they saw a responsibility to challenge anyone who deviated from the law. Arrogance, that false sense of self, was blinding them to the presence of God. Jesus was calling for humility to open their eyes to the heart of another and to God.

If I don't see you, how can I find our common ground for relationship? How can I forgive or be forgiven? Where will I find emotional resonance that leads to empathy? In his sermon, Love In Action, Martin Luther King preached "forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude." He challenged us to see and act beyond getting even or saving face, every day. He also cautioned us about intellectual and spiritual blindness. The people who crucified Jesus and the people who killed and persecuted persons who are different in skin color, culture, or faith are people who do not see the other. King wrote that slavery in America was perpetuated by the blind perception that "a system that was economically profitable must be morally justifiable." Early landowners did not see any part of themselves in the Africans they bought and sold; they saw sub-humans. When we do not see the other and we cannot embrace difference, we risk perpetuating injustice.

We are more likely to find authentic forgiveness and reconciliation to the extent that we embody it ourselves. It is a way of life. It is a practice. It is not something that comes easily for many of us. It is complicated. It is a practice to be developed and improved upon throughout our lives.

French mystic Jean Vanier outlines three principles of forgiveness that might help the practice (*On Becoming Human*, p. 153).

- 1) There can be no forgiveness unless we believe we are part of a common humanity. This means no one person or group is superior to others. We may be different in race, culture, religion, and capacities, but we all have vulnerable hearts, the need to love

and be loved, the need to grow and find our place in the world. Each of us has been hurt and each has hurt another.

- 2) To forgive means believing that each of us can evolve and change. It means believing that human redemption is possible, without locking anyone into ready-made judgments.
- 3) To forgive means to yearn for unity and peace. When the father in the parable of the prodigal son/forgiving father sees his son coming back to him, he rushes out to kiss him. There is no judgment, no disagreeable word, not even “I forgive you.” It is just a desire to be in relationship.

The path of forgiveness may be a journey. Before there is forgiveness, there is seeing. How interesting it would be to have eyes with many lenses, like the dragonfly. It might be possible to focus on a single thing and still be aware of the what and where of many other things. When I see a flower, my awareness of the rest of creation fades momentarily. How can I see it all? Yes, to have eyes like the dragonfly!

When there is seeing, forgiveness is possible. Of course, we can forgive the person, and still not forgive the action. Forgiveness does not remove responsibility for a bad act. It does not mean forgetting what another person has done. It means not holding onto negative feelings toward the person. By letting go of negative feelings, personal suffering does not fester and the need for revenge or hatred can pass.

Forgiveness and reconciliation do not occur in a vacuum. “It has always been God’s intention that we should live in friendship and harmony” (Bishop Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, p. 263). We all know how difficult it is to admit we are wrong. If

a husband and wife have quarreled without acknowledging fault, there is the risk of glossing over their differences for fear of more confrontation. Relationships are not easy. Forgiveness is not easy. It is risky, but without risk there will be no healing. There is only the risk of a broken relationship.

Forgiveness makes way for compassion and empathy. Like forgiveness, compassion (emotional recognition) becomes stronger with practice. In Buddhism, daily meditation cultivates compassion for all beings. The singular focus on quieting one's mind for even a few minutes each day creates an involuntary and compassionate response to the suffering of another. It is as if the meditation rewires the mind to see suffering and respond with loving kindness.

Compassion and empathy become the common ground of connection. When I can connect another person's suffering or joy to an experience in my life, I have found common ground. My attitude of "us" and "them" fade because I realize that we are "we." We may disagree, but nevertheless, and God is in the nevertheless, we stand on common ground. Our common ground may be a desire for our children to grow up healthy and strong. It may be our vision for a thriving economy or healthy earth. It may be our passion for social justice.

In the book of Job, God invites us to look at the paradox of creation – the proud, majestic ostrich that abandons its young, lions that tear apart gazelles, thunderstorms that are accompanied by rainbows. God is in all – the beautiful and the ugly. The presence of God is in the one who is wounded and the one who has wounded. To be in relationship with another, my own experience of fear, forgiveness,

and love serves as a means of connecting with the pain and joy of the other. It's where I find our one square foot of common ground.

We are all in this journey together. Ubuntu is a Zulu word that translates roughly to, 'I am because of who we all are'. Ubuntu reminds me that I am not alone and that I am part of a larger and amazing world. One of Maya Angelou's poems laments "Alone, all alone; nobody but nobody can make it out here alone." When I look out upon this congregation, I cannot help but think of the words of the poem and the promises of God to be present, to forgive, and to offer courage and assurance for our future.

This is my prayer for us: May we have courage to endure what is difficult. May life's challenges bring us closer together and may we always be able to turn to each other. May we be filled with spiritual grace. Open our hearts to see God's blessings, the encouragement of our friends, the support of our family, and the bond of love that unites us all. Amen.

