

Releasing a Hurt  
 Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis  
 March 10, 2019  
 Lent 1 Narrative Lectionary 2019  
 Matthew 18: 15-35

On Ash Wednesday, our Gospel reading came from the first part of chapter 18 of Matthew. In that part, the disciples ask Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven—and Jesus brings a child over as a living illustration and says that unless we become like children we can't enter the kingdom of heaven. Throughout this season of Lent, we'll be looking at different aspects of what it might mean to become like children—children who know how much their Parent loves them.

On Ash Wednesday, we looked at vulnerability. Today, we'll look at an aspect that in some ways is the flip side of vulnerability—forgiveness.

I'm part of a Facebook group of preachers who are using the Narrative Lectionary—and I have never seen so many posts as this week. I think the subject of forgiveness stirs up a lot. It's arguably at the center of our faith but it is so complicated—and so very, very hard.

And this Gospel reading doesn't make it any easier—but one thing the lectionary does is keep you honest and make you deal with tough texts like verse 35 where Jesus promises that our heavenly Father will torture us if we do not forgive our brother or sister from our hearts. Nothing like forgiving under threat!

Children who know they are loved by their parents usually have an easier time receiving forgiveness and giving it. It's like a pattern of living for them. They know that no matter how much they mess up, that it's not going to break the relationship. Their parents might be mad—they might yell—but the relationship is still solid.

I know a lot of adults—myself included—who hold grudges—but I don't know many young children who do. They're ready to forgive and move in close again—what matters is staying connected. So, I think one part of forgiving like a child means living in a pattern of forgiveness—one that is set by your parents.

So looking at our reading, one of the things to notice is that it's focused on life in the faith community. It's actually a very specific grievance process—laid out in scripture. And what it says to me is that people have been hurting each other in churches for a long time. Following the description of this process, Peter asks Jesus to put some more definition around it—*how often* do I have to forgive? What are the limits? And Jesus basically says just keep at it. It's not a one-time thing. It's something you just keep at. It's a pattern for living.

But what happens when the sin is clergy abusing children and youth? Or sexual harassment or assault? Does Matthew 18 mean that victims have to go privately to the one who has hurt them—and risk being hurt again? Does Matthew 18 mean that these crimes should be dealt with as an internal community matter? Does it mean that victims need to just forgive and let it go with no consequences for the one who has harmed them?

That's how this scripture has been used. Sadly, we know that it is not just the Roman Catholic Church where sexual assault has happened. There are high profile cases in both the Southern Baptist Church and the Mennonite Church, where survivors report being told they needed to forgive, based on Matthew 18.

Now, more than ever, it is important to say what forgiveness is not. It does not mean excusing the harm that was done or minimizing it or saying that it was ok. It also does not mean allowing those who have hurt us to keep hurting us or others. If a crime has been committed, it does not mean that the perpetrator should not face consequences.

There is so much that can be said about forgiveness, so I want to focus on the truth I hear in these particular words of Jesus. The word that is used in Matthew 18 is the same word used when you release

someone from their debt. That's what happens in the first part of the parable—the rich king releases the servant manager from a debt that can't be paid back.

When we forgive, we release the hurt. We choose not to hold on to it—not to let it define our lives—and in some sense, not to let it completely define the one who has hurt us.

It rarely happens all at once. I think this could be the truth behind Jesus' response to Peter's question about how many times do we have to forgive. Jesus basically says you just have to keep at it. Being a human being means that we release the hurt layer by layer. Sometimes, we think we're done—that we've completely forgiven someone—and then we find that there's still more to release.

I want to talk for a minute about the relationship between human forgiveness and God's forgiveness. The story that Jesus tells about the king who forgives a massive debt and then later hands the guy over to be tortured is extremely confusing—and more than a little disturbing. I honestly wish it had ended at verse 33—some scholars think it did—with the question, “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?”

That's really the point. The king forgave a debt that is unpayable—150,000 years' worth of a typical daily wage. The forgiven slave refuses to forgive a debt that is worth 100 days of a typical wage—microscopic in comparison. I hear Jesus pointing to this pattern of forgiveness that we are called to live in.

If we think about it in terms of what we owe God, that opens it up a bit. I used to think about it more in terms of what I've done wrong and how much God has forgiven me. But what if we look it not just in terms of what we've been forgiven—but also what we've been given. The list is huge but the most fundamental one is our very lives—what can we give in return for our lives. It truly is an unpayable debt.

But we know that we've been released from that debt—because when someone loves you as much as God loves us, you don't keep track of everything you've given—you're not looking for pay back. We are children who have been given a pattern for living.

To be honest, I don't know what to do with those two verses at the end of the story because I don't believe that's who God is. The best I can come to is that it is a description of what happens to our hearts if we don't forgive—we are tortured by the hurt we hold on to—and that is not the life that God wants for us.

One of the most powerful stories of community forgiveness is the story of the Amish community in Nickle Mines, Pennsylvania. The community calls it “the Happening”. What happened, on October 4, 2006, was the shooting of 10 girls, in their schoolhouse by Charlie Roberts, a non-Amish neighbor. Five of the girls were killed and Charlie took his own life.

Reflecting 10 years later, one of the father's said, “We still wonder—why did it happen?”

But it much of the outside world still wonders about how the Amish community responded to this horror. On the same day of the shooting, people brought food to Charlie Robert's widow. Six days later, the parents of the children who were killed and injured went to Charlie's funeral. They gave money to Charlie's family from the donations given to them.

The grieving parents started to look at forgiveness as—in their words—“the one good thing that can come out of this tragedy.” Charlie Roberts was dead and there was nowhere for their anger to go. They believe harboring anger and resentment is corrosive and they needed to release it.

The parents and community of Nickle Mines do not want others to see them as saintly or stoic. They do want people to understand that this is part of their faith.

This was a community decision to forgive that would have been made by the whole community. Forgiveness for the Amish doesn't mean accepting what happened as ok or even as understandable. It means "giving up the right to revenge and grudges." It's about releasing a debt that could never be paid back.

Stephen Nolt, a professor who has studied the Amish explains. "The essence of Amish life is about giving up. . . Giving up self to the group and to God. From how a person dresses to the kind of work one does, Amish life is shaped by rituals of self-surrender."

Forgiveness is a releasing that the whole community does together.

Reflecting ten years after "the Happening", parents talked about the struggle to stay with forgiveness. "It's not a once and done thing," one said. "You have to fight bitter thoughts."

Another said, "It's a journey. I still made that immediate choice in principle. But it took a few years until I could feel that I really meant it inside me, to forgive Charlie."

"Not seven times, but 77 times." It's something we have to keep at—something we practice over and over again. It's a pattern for living.

Sometimes in Lent, we take on the spiritual discipline of giving something up. I wonder if we might consider releasing a hurt.

I want to close with a few words from one of my favorite spiritual teachers, Jan Richardson.

*Forgiveness might well be the hardest blessing we will ever offer—or receive. As with any difficult practice, it's important to ask not only for the strength we will need for it, but also the grace: the grace that will, as we practice again and again, begin to shimmer through our wounds, drawing us toward the healing and freedom we could hardly have imagined at the outset.*

And finally, her poem called "*The Hardest Blessing*".

*If we cannot  
lay aside the wound  
then let us say  
it will not always  
bind us.*

*Let us say  
the damage  
will not eternally  
determine our path.*

*Let us say  
the line of our life  
will not forever follow  
the tearing, the rending  
we have borne.*

*Let us say  
that forgiveness  
can take some practice,  
can take some patience,*

*can take a long  
and struggling time.*

*Let us say  
that to offer  
the hardest blessing  
we will need  
the deepest grace,  
that to forgive  
the sharpest pain  
we will need  
the fiercest love,  
that to release  
the ancient ache  
we will need  
new strength  
for every day.*

*Let us say  
the wound  
will not be  
our final home;  
that through it  
runs a road,  
a way we would not  
have chosen  
but on which  
we will finally see  
forgiveness,  
so long practiced,  
coming toward us  
shining with the joy  
so well deserved.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.