

Calvary Presbyterian Church
“One Little Word”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 24—September 13, 2020

Lessons: Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35

Professor Tom Long tells the story of standing one day at the circulation desk of the library at Princeton Seminary, “when a friend...a professional pastoral counselor, approached carrying a bulky stack of books. Watching him struggle under his load, I asked him what he was doing, teasing him a bit in the process, ‘What’s a pastoral counselor doing with all those heavy books?’

“Undeterred, he quickly answered, ‘I’m doing some research on forgiveness.’

“I was surprised and puzzled. ‘Research on forgiveness?’ I asked. ‘What are you trying to find out?’

“He thought for a moment, then replied, ‘I guess I’m trying to find out if forgiveness really exists or not. You know, I see so little evidence of it in my work.’”¹

From our youngest days we’ve been taught to forgive those who do us wrong, and we can forgive little things, but how often do we see real evidence of forgiveness? We don’t see much in international affairs or in national or even city politics. It is not often seen in courtrooms where people seem to sue one another over almost anything and where the death penalty seems ever more popular. Even in one-on-one relationships between people it is difficult to discover. Does forgiveness really exist? It is a startling question, not what we would expect, especially in the Princeton Seminary library, yet it is also a fair question. As Professor Long says, “forgiveness is extremely difficult to produce. Forgiveness is not an external act of Christian obedience, not like tossing a dollar in the Salvation Army bucket at the mall or giving a worn, cast-off coat to the clothes closet. Those are good things to do, but they can be done without great cost or serious change. Not so with forgiveness. To forgive someone means to be personally transformed by the act, and that means that forgiveness is deeply threatening.”²

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus has been talking about our relationships within the community of faith. He talks about rivalries and putting people down. He talks about times when people go astray: we are supposed to leave the rest of the flock and go search for the lost sheep. He talks about those who do wrong and separate themselves from the community: we should go try to bring them back. Peter, ever the bold disciple, tries to get a handle on Jesus’ magnanimity: “If another member of the community sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” That’s a lot. Many of us are good at forgiving once or maybe even twice, but by the third time we’ve been wronged, we’ve had enough. Peter’s suggestion of forgiving seven times is extraordinarily generous but Peter gets no credit for his generosity. Jesus says, not seven times but seventy times seven, we should forgive. In other words, there should be no limit to our forgiveness. It is something that goes on forever. And, while Peter and the rest of us are scratching our heads wondering how on earth we are supposed to forgive over and over again, Jesus tells a story about a man whose debt was so astronomical there simply was no way he could pay it off. He owed ten thousand talents or more than the wages of a day laborer for 150,000 years, about 1.5 billion dollars today. The slave begs for mercy and makes the absurd promise that he will repay the debt, which of course he cannot possibly do. He begged for mercy, and the king forgave his debt. On his way out, immediately after receiving such generosity, this same slave came upon someone who owed him a small sum and demanded full payment. Of course, the king found out and couldn’t understand why the servant had failed to share the same kind of generosity that he had just received. And the story ends with his being thrown in jail

until he can repay the debt, which is the same thing as the rest of his life. But, as Barbara Brown Taylor points out, this really is a technicality, because he is already behind bars, “bars of his own making. By refusing to be forgiven and refusing to forgive, he had already created his own little Alcatraz, where he sat in solitary confinement with his calculator and kept track of his accounts...By the end of the parable Peter thinks he has gotten the message: do unto others or the king will do unto you, only that is not the message of the parable at all. The message of the parable is, ‘Do unto others as the king has already done unto you.’ It is not a matter of earning your forgiveness, or letting others off the hook so that you will be let off the hook yourself.

“It is a matter of understanding that you have already been forgiven, that someone to whom you owe everything--your life and breath, your blue eyes, your fondness for fresh tomatoes, your pleasure in the moon and stars, all the loves of your life--someone who has given and given and given to you and who has gotten precious little in return has examined your enormous debt in great detail and knows from your credit rating that the chances of repayment are nil. Someone who knows all of that has taken the stack of your IOUs and torn them in two, balancing your books in one fell swoop for one reason and one reason alone: because that someone wants to remain in relationship with you, and wants you to be free to respond.”³

Real forgiveness is rare because it is so very difficult to do. Yet it is also absolutely necessary if we are to grow in our lives and in our faith. When we refuse to be forgiven and refuse to forgive, we create our own prison cells, where we sit in our own solitary confinement, keeping track of all our accounts. God wants to set us free from that.

Forgiveness is radical and forgiveness is not an excuse to suggest that justice is not important. Real forgiveness says no to the worst in humanity while at the same time saying yes to a new future where there is no more injustice, suffering or abuse.

This parable is about recognizing that we all are debtors, people who have been forgiven a debt we could never repay. So, when we are wronged, we need to recognize that we are not completely clean ourselves; we need to struggle to be as forgiving as God who demands justice and refuses to let anyone of us go. We need to recognize that even those who are responsible for diabolical acts are also children of God, with the capacity for change. As Paul asks the church in Rome, why are we passing judgement on our sisters and brothers? We all stand before the judgement seat of God and as Jill Duffield points out, “being merciful to each other really matters to God.”⁴

Serene Jones is the President of Union Seminary in New York and she writes about an experience with her father when she was a child. He was supporting an African American man and a Jewish woman for the local school board in their Texas town. It was not necessarily a popular thing to do in those days and he went out to encourage others to support these candidates. One day as he was passing out fliers and discussing the views of those candidates, Jones witnessed a group of men spit in her father’s face. Around the dinner table that night, she tried to describe what she had seen. Her mother was furious that her little girl had been exposed to such a grown-up thing, but her father said, “I’m sorry you had to witness that, Serene,.... I don’t agree with the views of those men, but it is critically important that we never allow ourselves to believe we are fundamentally better than anyone else. Who knows what life may have given them to deal with or how they were raised...Just remember, the grace of God falls upon us all in equal measure.”⁵

Our forgiving God wants to set us free to live in a community of reconciliation and that is hard work. Congressman John Lewis understood this reality. He was, as you will remember, involved with the Freedom Riders, on a bus, riding into the deep South where they encouraged each other to write out a will because some of them might well be killed. Lewis and another man were cornered in a bus station by a group of men who beat them with baseball bats, leaving them lying on the floor in pools of blood. Eventually they came to and managed to get help.

Several years ago, a man visited Lewis in his office at the Capitol in Washington and said that he was one of those attackers who had beaten Congressman Lewis and he asked for forgiveness. Lewis came out from behind his desk and the two men hugged and cried and Lewis, describing this meeting said quietly: "People can change."

Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers, once wrote about visiting his closest seminary professor, Bill Orr, in the hospital, after he had suffered a stroke. Mr. Rogers was curious about the verse from the hymn *A Mighty Fortress is our God* that says: *The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him. His rage we can endure. For lo! his doom is sure. One little word shall fell him.* He asked Dr. Orr, "What is that one little word that will fell the prince of darkness, that word that will strike down evil?" After a few quiet seconds, Dr. Orr replied: 'One little word: forgive, Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' He went on, 'You know, Fred, there's only one thing that evil cannot stand, and that is forgiveness.'⁶

In honor of the one who gave his life for us all, we are invited today to seek and to spread God's radical forgiveness far and wide.

Let us pray: As you have forgiven us, dear God, help us to be forgiving ourselves. Set us free from prisons of our own making and empower us to live by your grace. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *To Err is Human: To Forgive...?* in *The Living Pulpit*, Vol 3, No. 2 April-June 1994 © The Living Pulpit, Inc.

² Ibid.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Once More From the Heart* in *The Seeds of Heaven*, © 1990 Forward Movement Publications.

⁴ Jill Duffield, *Looking Into the Lectionary*, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 15th Sunday After Pentecost

⁵ Serene Jones, *Call It Grace* © 2019 Viking.

⁶ Fred Rogers, *Neighbor: Nourishing Our Life Together* in *The Living Pulpit*, Vol 11, No 3 July-September 2002 © The Living Pulpit, Inc.