

Forgiveness Frees Us

Proper 19A

Exodus 14:19-31

Psalm 114 (and Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21)

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

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Our lectionary readings today feel like they belong in the somber season of Lent. Interwoven into them are themes of desert wandering, judgement, and the fate of unforgiving hearts. They urge us towards self-reflection so that we can move from darkness to light. Within them lies the hope of new life and new beginnings that emerge when we are able to forgive.

In our reading from Exodus, the waters of the Red Sea that had parted to let the Israelites cross, come crashing down upon Pharaoh's army of chariots and their horses. When I read this passage, I find it challenging to think beyond the loss of life. What helps me to understand the Israelites celebration of deliverance is remembering all that they had endured as captives of Egypt, and their arduous journey to freedom in the Promised Land.

The Israelites' Exodus from Egypt show us how hard it can be to free ourselves from the invisible chains that bind our hearts and souls. Think of how many times they cried out to go back to their captors in Egypt. There were many hardships on their journey to freedom. It was far from being fast and easy. Consider how often they went from praising God to cursing God for their fate. Their long desert wandering mirrors as our own as we try to find ways to forgive. Recall also that to this day, they remember their time in Egypt and celebrate their freedom from bondage. Contrary to popular belief, we don't have to forget the wrongs done to us to be able to extend forgiveness. But we do have to choose peace over retaliation so that we can break free of the cycle of harm.

The unforgiving servant in Matthew's gospel is stuck in a cycle of harm. This parable is brutal. Human trafficking, exploitation, violence, and torture intrude upon a narrative of mercy and forgiveness. Yet, it is the juxtaposition of these concepts that serve to open our minds to the impact of forgiveness in our lives. Christ, the King of Kings, has freely extended to us mercy,

forgiving all our sins if we ask from our hearts. Every Sunday in the Lord's Prayer we pray, "God forgive us our trespasses." But the prayer doesn't end there does it? Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. An inability to forgive leaves us trapped in our misery and pain. We are called to extend the same forgiveness that we receive. It is only then that we can find true freedom.

If we are to truly forgive, then we must pay heed to Paul's admonishment to avoid judging others. Judging others, though, is instinctive. It is part of our survival mechanism. Is the person approaching friend or foe? Do I stay or do I flee? But most of our judgements about people have nothing to do with survival. They are used to fuel our egos. We use judgement to harm others. It becomes a way to release us from that pesky need to seek understanding.

We assume a lot about people. Bias is a huge driver of the judgements we make. We allow ourselves to be drawn into society's view of others rather than seeing them through God's eyes. Judgement closes our hearts and minds. It can drive bitterness. These things interfere with our ability to forgive others. If we are to live fully into God's grace that means we must forego judgement. The ability to extend grace to those around us helps us to forgive one another.

For us humans, forgiveness is often a huge challenge. It requires conscious effort and continual practice. We must have patience with ourselves and with others. Peter wanted a simple way to forgiveness, like a painting-by-number requiring only seven spaces to fill in. The steps all laid out, no thinking required. He wants an easy path to forgiveness. Let's face it, we all want that. So, we try to make forgiveness seem easy.

But rather than a simple painting by the numbers, forgiveness tends to be more like a painting made up of thousands of tiny dots of different colors. It is only when we step back that we see the painting of a Sunday afternoon in a Paris park¹. Forgiveness often requires baby steps over time. Little dots of progress that make up the whole. Forgiveness might also be described as being like an abstract painting by Jackson Pollock. Intersecting splashes and drips create multiple layers to achieve something of significance. Forgiveness is often a messy.

Don't get me wrong, there are times when forgiveness is neat and tidy. Genuine words of apology and forgiveness over small mistakes go a long way towards maintaining a good relationship. Understanding that everyone makes mistakes, particularly when distracted or tired, helps us to extend grace. Quick forgiveness keeps small stuff from becoming big stuff.

But some transgressions and violations make forgiveness seem impossible. Damaged trust, broken promises, harm to mind or body- these mark us deeply. Offenses such as these drive our anger. They can keep us from being able to feel love or to show love to others. Some of the pain we experience drives a need to hurt others as we have been hurt. Words and deeds that mark us deeply can tie our souls into knots as we brood in bitterness on the wrongs done to us. They are like chains that enslave us; keeping our hearts, souls, and minds from being free.

To truly be free, we must figure out how to forgive. Forgiveness is a gift to us and to God. It is part of the healing process. Remember that forgiving ourselves is just as important as forgiving others. No one is perfect. We need to keep this thought at the forefront of our mind- nobody is perfect. We are shaped by our circumstances in life, but we don't have to be defined by them. Forgiveness liberates us from those things that keep us from moving forward. We experience spiritual transformation when we forgive one another. It is only through forgiveness that we can achieve reconciliation.

Forgiveness is our work. We can't force someone to accept our forgiveness. It is never too late to forgive. Even if someone is no longer present with you, you can still say the words that come from your heart, "I forgive you. For things done and left undone. For things said and left unsaid. I forgive you." It is like our own personal exodus from bondage to freedom. And that is reason to rejoice, praising God for our liberation from those things that held power over us.

If we are to live into Christ's commandment to walk the way of love, then we must forego judging others and forgive as we are forgiven. The path we are called to walk is challenging, often going against our selfish human instincts. We can't walk this path alone. In our collect, we prayed for the Holy Spirit to direct and rule our hearts. But this can only happen if we allow the Holy Spirit into our souls. It is with the help of the Holy Spirit that we can see Christ's light when our heart is shrouded in darkness. They guide us on our way to granting forgiveness to others and to ourselves. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we discover new life and new beginnings in the freedom that forgiveness brings.

Amen.

References

1. Seurat, G. (1884-1886). *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*.