

A SECOND LOOK AT FORGIVENESS

The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards
October 31, 2010 Luke 19:1-10

At the beginning of this month, I preached a sermon about forgiveness. And what I basically said was that we are all called to forgive because forgiveness is the way we participate in the way God is transforming the world in love, and that even though forgiveness is often really difficult, remembering that the world and everyone in it will always be deeply flawed might make it easier.

I got a lot of feedback on that sermon, as I always do on sermons about forgiveness. Some of you shared with me stories about major betrayals and egregious wrong-doing, especially within your extended families. So I have thought more about forgiveness and I'd like to offer a few more thoughts about it, especially since it works so well with today's story about Zaccheus.

Jesus did tell his disciples that they had to forgive, but he gave them this mandate in a specific context. He said they had to forgive if the person who had wronged them had asked for forgiveness.

So that nuances the mandate a bit, doesn't it? We all know what it's like to be asked for forgiveness...usually it's pretty uplifting. When someone admits their guilt and expresses sorrow for what they have done, you can almost feel your heart soften. It at least opens the door to forgiveness, it gets the process started.

But if the person hasn't asked for forgiveness, if he or she has gone blissfully on their way after hurting you – well, that's a different story, right? Can't we just write those people off and consign them to perdition? Why should we bother giving them something they haven't even asked for and don't want? How do we hold these people in our

hearts, these people who have whacked us and seem oblivious to the damage they have done?

I think we need to remember that the gospel ideal is forgiveness. We are called to be like Jesus, and he always forgave. No exceptions. But it's a process, it's a journey. And the story of Zaccheus shows us how to get there, or rather, how we can let forgiveness happen to us.

Last year at one of my classes, I asked the people attending how they would articulate the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. And someone answered, "The New Testament invented forgiveness." Technically that's not really accurate, since forgiveness has been around as long as God has (which is to say, forever), but that statement got me thinking.

Now it's not true that the Old Testament God is an angry, judgmental, and unforgiving God (that's a Christian stereotype of the Old Testament), but it is true that the Old Testament understands forgiveness in a different way than the New. If you've been reading along with the Bible Marathon folks, you have noticed this as you've read through Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The Old Testament has an acute sense of the human need for propitiation and expiation, as well as a dramatic depiction of the consequences of human sin in terms of people's relationship with God. I was interested to see, in Leviticus, that the ancients believed that even when someone was murdered and the murderer could not be found, there was still objective guilt that needed to be dealt with. So you see that the ancient Jews thought of themselves as living in a morally dangerous universe.

The entire sacrificial system of ancient Judaism was created to deal with guilt – or, put another way, to obtain God’s forgiveness for wrongdoing. God’s command that His people be holy just as He was holy was taken absolutely seriously, hence the complexity and rigor of the law. Over time (and I’m compressing a lot of time here), as the prophets pointed out, this tended to make forgiveness into a kind of transaction: You broke the law? Do what the law prescribes for this transgression, and you will be off the hook. Today’s reading from the prophet Isaiah records God’s anger about how the sacrificial system had, for some, become pro forma and unconnected with true repentance.

Jesus introduced an entirely new understanding of God – that’s one of the reasons they killed him. He challenged the way his people thought God worked. He said, “What you think is holy, is actually corrupt. How you think you are connecting with God is actually disconnecting you from God.” Oh boy, they didn’t like that.

Well, some people did like it. And those were the people who fill up Luke’s gospel: all the outsiders and the losers, people who would never be considered insiders because it was impossible for them to fully keep the law because they were “defective” in some way, either physically or socially or morally. Widows, beggars, blind people and sick people and lepers, tax collectors, crooks, and prostitutes. Now we have romanticized these people and made them into lovable rogues because we’ve heard the stories so often, but these people really were persona non grata, just like the criminal Steven Hayes who killed that family in Cheshire, terrorists, even child abusers. Having sunk as low as they could go in the social and religious system, to this kind of person Jesus seemed like pretty good news. Because, as he himself said, he came to save the lost. No need to get saved if you’re not lost.

We see an example of this in today’s gospel. Notice that Zaccheus is the chief tax collector. He’s a rich guy. He won the Roman contract for collecting the taxes in Jericho and has other people doing the actual work for him. It was like owning a franchise. Other people paid him to be one of his collectors. He and his employees would have been hated by their fellow Jew. And so

Zaccheus would have been thought of as beyond the pale morally and politically.

And so Jesus has caught his attention. He wants to see him. He’s so short he has to climb a tree to see him, and when Jesus spots him in the tree it’s probably the first time anyone has actually looked up at him. **Notice that Jesus sees Zaccheus before Zaccheus sees Jesus.** The minute Jesus sees him, he invites himself to Zaccheus’s house, which no law-abiding Jew would do since with whom you ate was a primary indicator of religious purity. Jesus says, “I **must** stay at your house today.” He’s very clear, almost insistent. He doesn’t ask to come; he says he must come.

And immediately Zaccheus repents. He hands over tons of money to the poor and to anyone he’s treated unfairly, much much more than the law required.

Here’s what I want you to notice: that Jesus forgave Zaccheus before he repented. We think it works the other way: we repent, God forgives. Nope. Doesn’t work that way. It’s as clear as a bell: Jesus brought Zaccheus back into community (which is what forgiveness is) by going to his house; and Zaccheus’s response is generosity (which is repentance in action). Zaccheus is reunited with God and with other people. Forgiveness first, repentance second.

Notice too that Zaccheus never actually asks for forgiveness. He doesn’t say “I’m sorry I was the foreclosure king.” And Jesus never says to Zaccheus: “I forgive you.” That’s because forgiveness is not a commodity. It’s not anything we “have.” And so forgiveness is not conferred; it’s realized. That’s what this story is really about. In Jesus, forgiveness is made present. It is no longer a transaction. It is no longer something I possess that I decide to grant (or not) to someone who has hurt me. Forgiveness is like the father in the story of the prodigal son: it’s always running out to meet us. Forgiveness first; repentance second.

But if we want to be able to receive forgiveness and offer forgiveness, we need to be willing to climb a tree for it. To be open to it, as Zaccheus was. That’s all he did: he climbed a tree. Jesus did the rest.

Which I think means that if there are people in your life who have hurt you badly, and if you can't imagine being able to forgive them, then all you need to have is the willingness to forgive. All you need to do is open your heart to forgiveness. Opening your heart is the moral equivalent of climbing a tree as a short person – it's scary, it takes some time, but you will get a view you have never had before. And if you open your heart to forgiveness, it will happen. Sometimes it will happen quickly; sometimes it will take years; sometimes it will not happen until after death. Because in Jesus, forgiveness is now present. Open your heart to it, and it will start to leak in.

The longer I am a priest, the more I know how hard life is, how mysterious life is. How reconciliation and forgiveness are most often managed within relationships with patience, a kind of respect for the beauty and dignity of every person, no matter what they have done, and the sure knowledge that as human beings we rarely do the right things in the right order. The universe is not arranged so that forgiveness is dependent on repentance, luckily for Zaccheus and lucky for us.

Perhaps you have seen that movie that was made about twenty years ago, "Places in the Heart." Sally Field was the star and John Malcovitch and Danny Glover were also main characters in it. The movie takes place in the Texas dustbowl during the depression. Sally Field's husband is the town sheriff and he is accidentally shot one night by a drunken teenager. She is left trying to get their cotton crop harvested without any help. Danny Glover plays an itinerant worker who steals from her; but she forgives him and he helps her get the crop in and secure a fair price for it. There is a Zaccheus figure in the movie – the evil banker who is eager to foreclose on the cotton farm. And the KKK tries to run Danny Glover out of town. The movie is fantastic and great for kids to see. By the end, some things are resolved and some things are not. It's a story about real life. There's no perfect ending.

What I will never forget is the final scene, which shows all the characters who have appeared in the movie, the living and the dead, the good guys and the bad guys, and everyone in between. And they are all in church, sitting in pews as you are now,

and they are passing the Communion plate to each other. As they give Communion to each other, they say "The peace of God." Friend to friend, friend to enemy, the words are the same: "The peace of God."

I think that is God's vision for us. That's the ending He intends for this world – that at the end of time, when all is said and done, we will be in communion with each other. That's what forgiveness is for.

So today, when you come to the altar rail for Communion, I'd like you to bring someone with you. Someone, living or dead, whom you haven't been able to forgive, someone with whom you have a broken or troubled relationship. Carry them in your heart, and when you receive Communion, extend to them the peace of God. Forgiveness first; repentance second.

Amen.