Things Are Not as They Seem

Matthew 18:21-35

September 17, 2017

Nuuanu Congregational Church

*Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times? Jesus said, “Not just seven times, but as many as seventy-seven times.*

*Matthew 18:21-22*

I want to introduce you to my good friend, Ndume Olutashani. I met Ndume during my time as head of the Office for Church in Society of the United Church of Christ. Ndume, who was born Erskine Johnson, at the time I met him, was on death row at the maximum security prison in Nashville, Tennessee, found guilty of a capital offense he did not commit. I had begun a task force to address the issue of the death penalty and had taken members of the task force to meet several of the men on death row there. We heard their stories and entered into conversations with them, one on one. Ndume and I shared a connection and we began a friendship that has endured over the years.

Soon after that initial encounter in that stark, bleak room, I began visiting Ndume about once a quarter. His lawyer, who worked pro bono on behalf of Ndume, put me on his defense team so that I could visit as often and for as long as I wanted. We would just sit and talk story and I came to know Ndume from his growing up in the projects of St. Louis until the present moment. I learned what life was like on the row, about the other men who were there. We talked politics, economics, religion and anything else that came up. Even though he did not even graduate from high school, he was an intensely intelligent human being. He read anything he could get his hands on. For Christmas, he asked for a subscription to *The Nation.* He read all the law books in the prison library and participated in his own appeals. He had been on death row for nineteen years when we met. We rejoiced when he was taken off death row and put into the general population after twenty-one. He could have gotten out after a few years later, but he refused to show remorse for a crime he did not commit. I was there to greet him when he walked out of prison after twenty-six. The judge in the appeal ruled in Ndume’s favor on prosecutorial misconduct and after a supposed eyewitness recanted her testimony, saying she was coerced by the police and prosecution.

I bring up Ndume’s story simply because I had gotten to know Ndume over the years and I had asked him on more than one occasion whether he was bitter about what the criminal justice system had done to him. Ndume genuinely harbored no hatred nor bitterness toward those who took from him twenty-six years that he will never retrieve. Resentment, he knew, only hurts the one who harbors those negative emotions.

In this week’s lectionary, we find the gospel writer continuing his section on church discipline. As I shared last week, the gospel writer Matthew is talking to the church over a half century after Jesus’ earthly life. The inevitable squabbles, cultural clashes, personality conflicts, differences of opinion and other such messiness had crept into the life of the faith community. So we have these teachings. Matthew brackets Jesus parable of the unforgiving servant with concerns that were going on in his church at the time. So verses 21 and 22 are Matthew’s words, as is the concluding verse. Everything in between is the parable that Jesus taught.

What I have concluded as I have read this passage over the years is that Matthew misunderstood the intent of Jesus’ parable. Maybe I’m wrong, but so be it. Matthew’s church had a problem, that is, people harboring resentment and ill feelings over some wrongdoing of another church member. So last week, he has Jesus telling us to go to the perceived wrongdoer and try to reconcile. As he expands on this, he tells us that even if the person you go to admits wrongdoing and is reconciled to you and the church, you may still have in your heart a feeling of resentment or hurt. Matthew wisely understood that this can be the case, and so he expands the teaching, putting words in the mouth of Peter: Lord, how many times must I forgive someone? Seven times? Seminary professor Karoline Lewis, commenting on Peter’s question and Jesus’ response, says: “Of course, Jesus’ response to Peter’s question doesn’t really provide an answer but rather points out the misdirection of the question itself. How many times should we forgive? The issue is not how much or how often we are asked to forgive or should forgive. The act of forgiveness is already a limitless, measureless act. Forgiveness is never *not* present in our lives and in our relationships. That’s the issue. Forgiveness is part and parcel of the Kingdom of Heaven. It’s a constant. It’s not optional. It’s not a choice. We want it to be -- and that’s at the heart of Peter’s question.” Peter wants Jesus to say, after the offender has done a harmful act so many times, and you have forgiven him time and again, at some point you don’t have to forgive any longer. Peter is looking for another law to follow, and Jesus will have none of it. Learning to and practicing forgiving is not an elective course in the curriculum of the reign of God; it is part of the core curriculum.

Even as we have tried to learn and practice forgiveness in our lives, we soon find out it’s not as easy as it may appear at first glance. You know as well as I that when someone has hurt you deeply, it is not easy to let forgiveness push out resentment, hurt, and anger in your heart.

Forgiveness does not mean allowing the bad behavior to go unacknowledged and brush it under the table. Loved ones of alcoholics and of abusers know full well what I mean. They call it enabling. Forgiving is tough work, but it is holy work.

I want you to meet another friend, Bud Welch. I don’t know Bud as well as I do Ndume, but let me tell you his story. Bud lost his daughter Julie Marie in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. Bud relates how hate festered in his heart for Timothy McVeigh, the person responsible for his devastating loss. When McVeigh was captured, Bud wanted nothing less than to see him suffer and die as painfully as possible. He tells of how the hatred ate at him. he was a devout Catholic layperson, and he knew what his faith told him about forgiveness, but the hate would not let forgiveness find a place in his heart. He shared his pain with his priest. His priest knew McVeigh’s father lived in upstate New York and was also a Catholic. To make a long story short, it was arranged so that Welch could travel to New York to meet with McVeigh’s father. The two men sat together in McVeigh’s father’s living room, shared their pain, loss, and grief, cried and embraced. Two fathers, one of a victim and the other of the perpetrator, found forgiveness and grace and were liberated. Bud now heads a group of people who are family to victims of capital crime, and they speak throughout our country, sharing testimony on the mandate to forgive as Christians and to abolish capital punishment.

Forgiveness is never easy, but always necessary. Sometimes we may even have to forgive God. Almost every week in worship we pray: forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Those words may fall easily off our tongues, but I hope not. May they never just be a recitation, but a teaching we plant, nourish and allow to blossom in our hearts, so on that day when we are called upon to do so, we may find the courage, strength and will to forgive, just as we have been forgiven.