



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"Seventy Times Seven" - The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - 9/13/2020

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

If you are someone who is encountering some kind of after effect of violence or oppression, or being cheated or being portrayed or any kind of offense that needs your forgiveness, that forgiveness is the only way for you to somehow respond to these effects, today's gospel is difficult to hear. Because when Peter says to Jesus, Lord, how many times must I forgive another member of the church who sins against me? And when Jesus says 70 times 7, Jesus's intent there is to somehow rhetorically say that forgiveness is always something we must do.

And that's hard for us to hear if we're looking for some way of finding in the scriptures some kind of words of life, because the parable that follows in today's gospel is incredibly difficult for us to hear. It's about a servant of a king who refuses to forgive, and then somehow is tortured for not being willing to extend the king's forgiveness. So today's gospel is a difficult gospel if you have been betrayed, if you have been attacked, if you have been abused, if you have been cheated, if you have been neglected, and you're looking at today's gospel for some words of life.

And today, what I want to do to you is somehow convince you, those of you who are suffering, those of you who are wounded, those of you who are damaged, that today's gospel actually indeed bears some words of life. And to do that, I'm going to offer you a different parable that goes with the grain of the teaching of today's parable in today's gospel, but extends it and amplifies it and moves it in a positive direction.

And I'm going to offer you my own experience of forgiveness. Not because I want to speak as one with authority. I'm not a great authority when it comes to forgiveness, but as one who is under authority, As someone who has experienced the forgiveness that God can give us in this world in real time and space and how that forgiveness can make a difference in your life and mine.

And so I've chosen to speak from the steps here today to emphasize the fact that I'm coming to you as a witness, more than an ordained person, delivering a word. I want you to hear me as someone speaking directly to you, as someone speaking horizontally as one Christian to another about what God can do

through forgiveness. And to get my way into this sermon, I've brought up before you a kind of parable that I encountered in 2002.

A friend of mine was a photographer for National Geographic and other wonderful magazines, Stephen Alvarez. He has incredible skills and he was doing some research in Sub-Saharan, Africa, around people who had been displaced. And he was in a refugee camp in Southern Sudan and he met a man named Fred Taban. Fred Taban was someone who told him a story of forgiveness. He wanted Stephen to hear this story.

And as he was telling the story, Stephen took two pictures. And the first picture that you have before you is of Fred covering his eyes. And that was the picture that Stephen took as Fred described an attack upon his family, in which his sister was brutally attacked and raped by soldiers from the National Islamic Front. And then the second picture you have before you is of Fred looking up over his hands. And that's the moment that Fred began to speak about his decision to somehow forgive the people who had done that to himself, to his family, to his sister, and not to seek revenge, to not answer in kind for the violence that had been done to him and to his family and to his sister.

And that image, those two images of Fred Taban were incredibly powerful to me because at that time I had been studying all of the attempts to find a way to forgiveness that had been happening in Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, South Africa. And I was moved by this picture, not because I was hoping to find some image of reconciliation for people who need to somehow find their way to justice. But because I saw in that image that Stephen took of Fred Taban, a kind of parable of what forgiveness might look like, a positive parable of today's gospel because Fred leaned into the promises of God given in today's gospel. And I had some work to do when it came to the work of forgiveness.

And over the years, I began to think about things that had happened in my life, things that I don't talk about readily to me, to the abuse that I suffered as a child. And in particular one moment in time in which a family member who was older led me as a little boy away from a family gathering and did things to me that should happen to no child ever. And that abuse was a wound in my soul. It marked me in a powerful way. And it went on for two years until somehow I found a way to get out of it.

And I never spoke to anybody about it because that abuse was part of a whole system of abuse in my family. It was an inconvenient truth that I could never speak. Something that I was convinced that people would not hear, that I would be blamed. And I suffered from that inability to both acknowledge what happened and to forgive.

And then in 2014, 12 years after I had had that image of Fred Taban on my office wall, the perpetrator of the abuse sought me out and begged for forgiveness. And before I could think too long about everything that was involved, but being assured in my mind and in my own judgment that this abuse, this pattern of abuse had stopped so I knew that no other child would be threatened, I forgave him.

In that moment, I felt a kind of expansiveness. I felt as if a burden that had been imposed upon me for decades and decades of my life, that that burden fell away. And I felt in that moment that I stopped being a victim. So in that moment of forgiveness, I had in my mind, the image of Fred Taban and I stepped into the place that he had stepped into with the hope that somehow the grace of God would be so powerful that I would experience some kind of transformation inside of me. And wonder of wonders, the minute I forgave that perpetrator, I began to experience the capacity to forgive other slights and attacks and betrayals and oppression. And I've been able to live an entirely different life because of it.

I share this with you not because I want you to admire me. I share this with you not because I want you to forgive every single thing that has ever happened to you in your life, because that is not for me to tell you, but for God to say to you through today's gospel. I say to you and share this story with you, merely a witness to the fullness that Christ promises us when we forgive. Forgiveness does not mean that we forget. Rather it means that we begin to remember differently. It means that the past no longer imprisons us, but opens to us a new future where that past becomes a reservoir for empathy.

And my experience of abuse never should have happened. There is no point at which I can say to you, straightforwardly, as Joseph says today in our reading from the Old Testament that God intended that abuse for good. So that when Joseph was abused by his brothers, even though they intended to harm him, God intended it for good. I cannot say that to you today because what I experienced was so horrible that one of the people I have to forgive in this life is God.

But what I can say to you is that by stepping into that forgiveness, that memory, that experience has become a kind of reservoir for empathy that has allowed me to speak words of peace and grace and joy and love to many, many people in many different circumstances. It's provided me with the ability to close distances created in this world and to find a way to be a better minister of the gospel. And forgiveness I want to suggest to you is one of those things in which there has to be a kind of divine appointment around them. Jesus is a hundred percent right, of course, when he says that we need to forgive 70 times 7 times. Jesus is right

to ask us to forgive in a way that is infinite because the minute we forgive, we enter into a new place and go with the grain of the gospel.

But forgiveness itself, the moment of forgiveness that can't be rushed. Some of you I know, because I know you all well are experiencing an incredible wound today. Some of you are just barely coming to acknowledge something that happened to you in your life that continues to nag you and limit you and hold you down and keep you from being the full person God created you to be. Some of you are experiencing oppression or bullying at work or at school. And it's hard to forgive in those instances.

So it's not for me to tell you that you must forgive today, but it is my place to tell you that God is going to lead you to forgiveness someday. And maybe today will be someday for some of you. What I can say to you today is that when God gives you the opportunity to forgive that you will experience true liberation and true joy. You will experience the power of God in this world in a way that eludes so many of us so often. You will understand what it means to love in a way that somehow is able to defeat death. You'll find your way to the life, the fullness of life that God has promised us in Christ.

And finally, I want to say today that there are many people who have tried to somehow harness the power of forgiveness politically to make it into a kind of way in which societies can be remade. And there is a good intention behind this because forgiveness is not a luxury in this world but a necessity. If we do not forgive each other, I fear for who we will be as a people. And there have been different points in our history, in this country and in this church and in this community where we have found the ability and the words to forgive one another.

All of this being said, I want to say that there is a kind of witness that we can do, but we have to be careful about how we make it politically, because too often we can tell others to forgive the crimes that have been done against them so that we can be absolved of any responsibility to address those crimes. Or to somehow advance the justice that needs to occur. The witness that we give of forgiveness has to come from the very fabric of our lives. We have to find a way to bear witness to the forgiveness here, to the forgiveness we seek, as well as to the forgiveness we give. And in that way, forgiveness becomes alive and a body of believers in a way that becomes salt and light for the world around it.

Early on in this pandemic, I wrote a poem that I want to finish with today. It's short. I was pondering that whole phenomenon of sheltering in place.

Let's break ourselves open
Let our insides out

The heart was never made to shelter in place
It heals by bleeding

Forgiveness is a moment in which by breaking ourselves open and stepping out of the necessity to continue the cycle of violence, we actually become strong and not weak. Forgiveness comes in that moment in which we let our insides out. We find ourselves more protected than we could ever be before. And our hearts by bleeding heal for Christ through the forgiveness that He gives us, gave it by shedding His blood. And in shedding His blood, He gave us life. And so when we forgive, when we let ourselves bleed, we find life eternal. Peter asked Jesus Lord, how many times must we forgive? And Jesus says 70 times 7.

Amen.

[End of Recording]