

“How Faith Grows: Forgiveness”

Matthew 18:21-35

November 11, 2018

When I was an undergraduate, the eminent scholar of world religions, Huston Smith, came to speak at Duke. Because I was enrolled in a class on interfaith dialogue, I had the opportunity to share dinner and conversation with Professor Smith, whose 1958 book *The World's Religions* began his lifelong journey of seeking wisdom in the diversity of religious expressions across the globe. Smith, who died in 2016 at the age of ninety-seven, was one of those people with whom you immediately connect, a gentle and loving soul who took time to listen and engage with a group of students. I will never forget the answer he gave to one of my classmate's questions about the distinctiveness of each religious tradition. He reflected for several minutes on the practices and beliefs of a wide range of religions. When he came to Christianity, his own tradition since his childhood as the son of Methodist missionaries in China, Smith paused. “Well,” he said, “for Christians, it has to be forgiveness; the worship of a God who forgives and who inspires and requires followers to forgive one another as well.” A God who forgives. A commandment to forgive.

I think Huston Smith was right about the faith we profess and the God we worship. I believe that forgiveness is the core theological value of our belief and practice. And I also believe, and I know from experience, that forgiveness is among the most difficult and challenging of our convictions. Perhaps this is why Jesus spent so much time on the topic, offering both direct teachings and clever stories that reinforce its significance. This morning's passage contains both. In fact, the entire eighteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel can be understood as a discourse on forgiveness. The chapter begins with the disciples of Jesus asking him an intriguing question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Of course, Jesus has an even more intriguing answer. He asks a young child to come and stand in the midst of the disciples and then responds, “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom heaven.” What does it mean to become like children?

There are many good answers, but today I'm thinking of forgiveness. If you've ever watched a group of children

playing, one thing you'll notice is the speed and ease with which wrongs are reported, acknowledged, and forgiven. Relationships can be broken and restored in a matter of seconds. Earlier this summer, I watched this happen. It was a hot afternoon, Sara was out of town, and I was out of patience. I had taken our boys to West Park, where there is a wonderful little stream and fountains for splashing. We were on that splash pad, which was filled with toddlers, far more toddlers than fountains. There were several adults attempting, with little success, to impose fairness and time limits. I watched as an older child walked over and pushed another down; the adult closest launched into action, approaching the offender and encouraging him to say he was sorry for this act. He begrudgingly obliged. Then I watched with wonder as the child who had been pushed reached out, gave the offender a big hug, and together they ran back into the water. If you want to experience the kingdom of God, Jesus says, become like a child.

Later in the same chapter, the theme continues as Peter has another question for Jesus, this one much more practical and utilitarian. “So, Jesus, if I am mistreated, how many times do I need to offer forgiveness to another?” Peter even suggests a potential answer, choosing the generous (and Biblical) number of seven times. Well, again, the response Jesus offers is mystifying. Not seven times, but seventy-seven times. With Peter surely dumbfounded, (how can we keep count!) Jesus shifts from command to story.

If the command to forgive seems extreme, the parable is meant to show us that it is no more extreme than the forgiveness we are offered. The story of the unforgiving servant teaches us that we forgive because we have been forgiven. The commandment to be reconciled to one another originates with God's posture toward us. We are called to be forgiven forgivers. The sin of the unforgiving servant is failing to acknowledge the depth of his own indebtedness or to extend the grace he has received to another. The man lives out of selfishness and vengeance when he has been treated with generosity and acceptance. The lesson is that forgiveness is central to the very heart of

God, and therefore it must be central for us as well.

Have you noticed that forgiveness has disappeared from our social, cultural, and political discourse? I hear far more about blame, fault, and excuse. When we are determined to show no weakness and give no ground, forgiveness is nearly nonexistent. I have lamented from this pulpit before the extreme incivility and even hatred that have come to characterize public discourse and personal interactions. Perhaps the unique gift of the church in such a time is to model the gift and command of forgiveness.

I do understand how difficult and complicated forgiveness can be for many of us. When we have been hurt, the human impulse is to hold on to that pain, perhaps even to wear it as a badge of honor, becoming a victim of all that has harmed us. But forgiveness can break the cycle of blame that simply perpetuates pain and assures us of endless conflict. In this context, imagine the power and possibility of true forgiveness. Imagine the gift of honest confession and the freedom of release from guilt and shame, and the release of a grudge held far too long, rotting our souls and isolating us from one another. Forgiveness is indeed freedom. Do you remember the healing that you felt when one dear to you spoke those powerful words: “I forgive you?” Perhaps there is someone whom you have been struggling to forgive, or whose forgiveness you long to receive. Maybe months or years have passed, and the pain caused or felt has hardened and settled deeply into your identity. My counsel is this: don’t wait another moment. This week, even this day, seek them out and be reconciled to one another. Embrace the possibility of forgiveness; do what you can to make peace and restore relationships. Claim your identity as a forgiven forgiver.

Several years ago, I was preparing to conduct a memorial service for the grandmother of a church member. I had been warned by members of the family that the woman had a daughter who had been estranged from the family for many years. Poor decisions and harsh words had characterized her relationship to the family and they weren’t even sure she would come to the service. I think it is fair to say that they were afraid of what might happen if she did come. As the family was gathering in my office prior to the service, one of the ushers knocked on the door, then opened it; a woman, who I immediately knew to be the estranged sister by the tension I felt, walked in the room. She was quiet for a moment, and looked all around the room; finally, her older brother walked over and embraced her. I will never forget his kissing her on the top of the head, and then,

tearfully motioning for the rest of the family to join the circle. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a clearer picture of the power of forgiveness than the one I witnessed as the three siblings walked, hand-in-hand, out of my office to honor their mother’s life. Henri Nouwen wrote, “Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.”

Each week when we gather here to worship God, we pause after our opening hymn and we do something very strange. We pray a prayer of confession. We remind ourselves of who we are in the light of God’s glory. Sinners. Broken, frail, fallen human creatures who can never seem to get it right. As a community, we ask for God’s mercy. Surrounded by brothers and sisters, our family of faith, we are strong enough to admit our weakness and our sin. But we never stop there, because the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not stop there. Before we are overcome by despair, we hear words of assurance that are music to our ears. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Then, we are called to be forgiven forgivers. Not because we are perfect, but because we are called. We practice forgiveness because we have been forgiven. Having been offered the gift of freedom from all that holds us captive, we are also empowered to free one another, to practice what Reinhold Niebuhr called the “final form of love.” Forgiveness.

It was October of 2006 in the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania—about a mile from my grandmother’s home. You may remember the horrific events of the day, a one-room schoolhouse becomes the scene of a terrible crime, five young children murdered by a disturbed local man who then takes his own life. It was a story of immense and irreparable pain in a tranquil community committed to faith and nonviolence.

Evil invaded a sacred space and the story might have ended there, in tragedy and senseless violence. But it did not. Days after the attack we learned more of the Amish community’s reaction. The grandfather of one victim said to a reporter, “We must not think evil of this man; he had a mother and a wife and a soul.” About thirty members of the Amish community attended the shooter’s funeral and his widow was invited to attend the service for the Amish children. Later, she wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors in the local newspaper. My grandmother saved

the clipping, perhaps thinking it would be included in a sermon someday, “Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you.”

Some were offended by the swift and complete reconciliation offered by the Amish Community. Too much too soon, it seemed outrageous, unthinkable, madness. Perhaps. Or perhaps it simply exposed the madness that we call normal: hatred, violent retribution, obsession with vengeance. Perhaps, by faith, they knew something most of us cannot comprehend. Perhaps those illogical words of forgiveness, those extreme acts of kindness, offered a disturbing, and mystifying window into the transformative power of faith.

May we all pray for the courage to be so peculiar. Amen.

ⁱ Henri Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing*, Crossroads, 1999.

ⁱⁱ Much of this information comes from reports of the Lancaster Intelligencer Journal, and from various other news sources, as well as information sent by members of my family who live in Lancaster County, PA.