

Fifteenth Week After Pentecost (RCL/A): *“The Sunflower, Jesus and the Challenge of Forgiveness”*

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

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Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

If forgiveness weren't so hard, there'd be more of it in this world. It's so challenging and eludes us so often that Jesus tells this story to His "buds" so He's sure they get the idea. It's kind of a ridiculous story, completely unrealistic, like a lot of other parables. A man has embezzled a **ginormous** amount of money from his boss, the equivalent of 150,000 years' wages. The crime is uncovered and the master is going to **sell** the guy, along with his family, to another master. The fellow begs the boss to rethink the situation, to give him time to repay the debt (which of course would be Mission Impossible). The boss is moved by his slave's terror and doesn't just give him time to come up with the money; he forgives the entire debt. Not likely in real life, right?

What happens next is more likely. The guy who's just been let off the hook collars a fellow slave who owes him a pittance. It's like the difference between \$100,000 and \$10. He'd been guilty of grand larceny and this other fellow had borrowed lunch money. The second slave also begs for time and mercy to repay the debt (which was quite do-able) but the 1<sup>st</sup> slave who'd skated away from **big** troubles won't give the fellow slave any slack. Instead, he sends him off to jail until he makes good on the tiny amount he owes. Fellow slaves cry "Foul!" to the boss, who is so enraged at what happened that he hands the 1<sup>st</sup> slave over to be tortured. *“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart.”* (Matthew 18:35)

Ouch. So let's remember that parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings. There's a message for the heart in each one, and the big message in **this** one is that

**whatever we're forgiving somebody else of is a lot less than what God is forgiving us.**

So we withhold forgiveness at our own peril. Any mercy we show to others is only a little sliver of the mercy God shows us. And if we're convincing ourselves that somebody else doesn't **deserve** forgiveness, we should quickly remind ourselves that **we** don't deserve **God's** forgiveness. We **deserve** God's profound disappointment, we "merit" only God's deep anger, but instead we receive God's steadfast, tender love and mercy. It's what we call **grace**, the love of God that comes to us as gift and not reward. **We** could never earn it, but thankfully Jesus **has**, through His life, death and resurrection. The thing about grace, like all our other blessings? It's meant to be passed along.

Knowing that our Gospel is about forgiveness, I took a book off my shelf this past week, a book I've been meaning to read for years. It's called *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. It's by Simon Wiesenthal, a concentration camp survivor best known for his work hunting down Nazi war criminals and bringing them to justice. He writes that he chose to participate in the prosecution of war criminals, because, "I thought the work of the commission might help me regain faith in humanity...."<sup>1</sup> He tells the story of how, during his World War II internment, he was taken off a work gang and rerouted to the hospital room of a dying SS officer, a man in his early 20's. The dying man recounts in great detail the story of an atrocity he committed, a terrible act of inhumanity resulting in the deaths of many innocent Jews, both adults and children. He had asked a nurse secretly to find a Jew to whom he could confess and from whom he could receive forgiveness before dying. This question is for those who haven't read the book. **How do you think Wiesenthal reacted? What did he say?** Remember: he had already been

imprisoned in a series of concentration camps for a couple of years. He'd suffered greatly, seen many other Jews executed or die of starvation, disease, suicide....

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The point of the book is to ask the question: what would **you**, the reader, have done in young Wiesenthal's place?

Sometimes when I find an article that's related to a book I've read, I tuck it into that book for future reference. I found this short piece, "The Long Road to Forgiveness," tucked into my copy of *The Sunflower*. It's written by a woman named Kim Phuc, best known from the Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of her as a child, running in terror down the road in Vietnam after napalm was dropped on her village and burned off her clothes. In this transcript of a radio essay broadcast in a series called *This I Believe*, she tells of a hospitalization that lasted 14 months and involved 17 surgeries. The long-lasting injuries resulted in chronic severe pain, including headaches. When it was time to go home, there wasn't much of a home left, and her family was destitute. She longed to become a doctor, but the local government pulled the plug on her schooling because they needed her for PR purposes. She remembers:

The anger inside me was like a hatred as high as a mountain. I hated my life. I hated all the people who were normal because I was not normal. I really wanted to die many times.

I spent my daytime in the library to read a lot of religious books to find a purpose for my life. One of the books that I read was the Holy Bible.

In Christmas 1982, I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior. It was an amazing turning point in my life. God helped me to learn to forgive – the most difficult of all lessons. It didn't happen in a day and it wasn't easy. But I finally got it.

Forgiveness made me free from hatred. I still have many scars on my body and severe pain most days but my heart is cleansed.

Napalm is very powerful but faith, forgiveness and love are much more powerful. We would not have war at all if everyone could learn how to live with true love, hope and forgiveness.

If that little girl in the picture can do it, ask yourself: **Can you?**<sup>2</sup>

There's the question of the heart embedded in the strange, challenging parable of the unforgiving servant: whom am I struggling to forgive? What has somebody done **to** me (or **not** done **for** me) that feels unforgivable? What situation in **my** life makes me a little uncomfortable as I pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"?

The first part of *The Sunflower* is Wiesenthal's reminiscences and the second part is the responses of 53 well-known people to the questions, "Had he done the right thing?" and "What would you have done in his place?" I read the responses of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Harold Kushner, two famous rabbis, the response of the Dalai Lama, a Buddhist, of Ted Hesburgh, the RC priest/former president of Notre Dame, Martin Marty, a Lutheran pastor, and Desmond Tutu, Anglican priest. Bishop Tutu speaks about the stories he heard as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa: stories of the brutality inherent in apartheid, and stories of extraordinary forgiveness on the parts of some of those horribly harmed. He writes:

... they have forgiven amazingly, unbelievably. Many claim to be Christians. They say they follow the Jewish rabbi who, when he was crucified, said, "Father, forgiven them for they know not what they do."

It is clear that if we look only to retributive justice [justice devoid of mercy], then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing... Without forgiveness, there is no future.<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

<sup>1</sup> Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (NY: Schocken Books, 1998), p. 84.

<sup>2</sup>Kim Phuc, "The Long Road to Forgiveness" (NPR *This I Believe, All Things Considered*, June 30, 2008).

<sup>3</sup>Op. cit., Wiesenthal, p. 268.

