

Third Sunday After Pentecost
The Rev. Christy Dorn

06-17-07

2 Samuel 11:26 – 12:10, 13-15

Psalms 32

Galatians 2:15-21

Luke 7:36 – 8:3

From today's Gospel: "Her sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love."

When we speak about the gifts of God or about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we very often think about the light and fireworks at Pentecost: The fire, the noise the storm, the gift of tongues, the gift of foreign languages, the laying on of hands, the healings, the evil spirits sprinting away, the streams of baptismal water, and all the conversions. We overlook that other time when, very calmly, Jesus blew over them and said: "You can forgive, I give you the power to forgive. You *can* absolve and you *can* set free."

So, how do you do with forgiveness? If there is one gift of God we need today, it's that gift of forgiveness. That's what I want to talk about today. I don't always do so well with it. When I think about the difficulty of forgiveness, I think about my cousin, Peter. When I was 20 years old, Peter was killed. He was 24. He was my favorite cousin—more like an older brother, really. He was in Northern California, out driving. He made the fatal error of picking up a hitchhiker. The guy killed him. The killer was caught and convicted after the police found Peter's wallet on him. I've never completely forgiven this man for taking Peter away from the people who loved him. I've never forgiven him for what he did to Peter's parents and grandparents.

In today's Gospel reading, a woman with an alabaster jar of ointment anointed Jesus' feet with her tears while he was attending a soiree at the home of a respectable religious leader. When a moral uproar ensued, Jesus observed that those who experience forgiveness, love much, while those who have no understanding of their *need* for forgiveness love little. Judging from the woman's tears and her humble posture, it would seem that she understood the implications of her unnamed sin and dared to approach God for forgiveness. Jesus invited her to draw near.

Forgiveness has been called a scandal, probably because it defies logic; it's unfair; it's unnatural. "Getting even" is much more natural. When we've been wronged, we can come up with a multitude of reasons against forgiveness:

"She needs to learn a lesson;"

"I don't want to encourage irresponsible behavior;"

"I'll let him stew awhile, it'll be good for him;"

"I was wronged—it's not up to me to make the first move;"

"How can I forgive her if she's not even sorry?"

Even though we readily—and reverently—acknowledge (in our heads anyway) that God loves everyone, don't you sometimes secretly harbor the notion that God resents the very same people

you resent? But forgiving turns that comfortable thought upside down. Yes, there's something unfair and scandalous and outrageous about forgiveness. How much more outrageous can life get just knowing that the person who treated you badly is loved by the same God who loves you?

“Her sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.” In her book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Annie Lamott talks unabashedly about the scorn she feels toward the President and his position on the war in Iraq. She writes, “I’ve known for years that resentments don’t hurt the person we resent, but they do hurt us and even sometimes kill us.” She goes on to say, “I’ve been wondering whether I could try to love my president, as Jesus would, without wanting to have him over for lunch.” “But,” she says, “if you refused even to **entertain** the idea of eating lunch with the person, in the distant future, would Jesus consider that you had really forgiven him?”

Today’s gospel tells us that forgiveness—our need to forgive and be forgiven—softens our cold hearts of stone so that we can love more. Some believe that “unforgiveness” will protect us from victimization—that if we hold onto our anger, bitterness and unforgiveness toward the person who has hurt us, it’ll protect us from further hurt. But I don’t think so. I think unforgiveness just makes us even more guarded and defended and helpless. There’s a residual bitterness that seeps into our capacity for peace of mind. Loving those who have wronged us, who annoy us beyond belief—whether it’s a family member, or a fellow church member, a stranger who’s committed a heinous crime, or even the President—loving them means trying to identify with their humanity and brokenness, and respecting them. Forgiveness doesn’t mean we have to agree with them or accept bad behavior.

Who do you need to forgive? Today, on this Father’s Day, I wonder how many fathers need to be forgiven. Sometimes we can’t forgive right away and that’s ok. Forgiveness is a process, a journey—sometimes a lifelong trek. Annie Lamott says that hearing the truth is a powerful beginning. We don’t transform ourselves, she says. But when we finally hear, the Spirit has access to our hearts, and that is what changes us. Forgiveness has begun. Then maybe, some day, we’ll be willing to entertain the idea of sitting down for lunch with that person. Then we’ll know we’ve truly forgiven.

May we release our grudges to God, and live in the freedom of love toward the one who has hurt us—whether that person repents or not. I must let my anger and resentment toward Peter’s killer loose—into God’s heart—so that I can move on. As we forgive, God transforms us from victims to over-comers—from wounded people to redemptive agents of God’s loving hand. We are set free from those who have wounded us to become healers of the wounded.

Maybe Frederick Buechner said it best. He said, “When somebody you’ve wronged forgives you, you’re spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience. When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you’re spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other’s presence.”