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Pentecost 16 – Year A

Starting this week, I was pretty happy about opening up our Gospel story, thinking this would be a really simple, life-affirming text to preach on. I wonder if this morning you may have felt some of what I did. You see, I was feeling pretty inspired as I started reading about Jesus telling Peter about forgiveness; that he should not forgive just seven but seventy seven times.

And so going into the parable he offers up I felt pretty hopeful. And this story about the king forgiving his servant starts in a pretty wonderful place. I start thinking this is a story that say there's no limit to the number of times we're called to forgive, there's no amount too vast, no sin too great that it can't be forgiven. And at this point in the parable, I'm thinking this thing can't get any more hopeful. And you know what? I was right! The debtor of course goes on to throw another guy into prison for not being able to pay him back, and when the king hears about this, he's like "Forgiveness? You kidding me? You're expecting that again after I forgave you and you wouldn't forgive that guy who owed you \$50 bucks? Nah, I'm thinking torture!" I guess behind the scenes this king had been forgiving this dude for a while and this final time number 78.

So this morning we're left to wonder about forgiveness as we're always called to forgive, at the same time as Jesus offers this seemingly unforgiving threat to those who don't forgive others.

As a friendly reminder to all of you, please remember that I thought when I first started reading it, this was going to be a pretty easy Gospel. But I'm glad we've got a reading to tussle with, because as tough as it is to understand this parable, it's nothing compared to how hard forgiveness can be.

Whenever forgiveness comes up, I tend to think about a book entitled the Sunflower. It was written by Simon Wiesenthal, a prominent holocaust survivor and author, who posed a question about the limits of forgiveness. In the story, Simon speaks of an encounter with a nazi soldier on his deathbed. The soldier explains the atrocities he committed against the Jewish people. And the soldier asks that Simon, in his capacity as a Jewish person, forgive him. After a time of silence, Simon walks out, saying nothing. He returns the next day to find the soldier has died and he poses, in the conclusion to this story, the question, should he have forgiven the soldier?

It's a fascinating account of what forgiveness looks like in this sort of situation. What forgiveness can survivors give to those who have killed and thus silenced those that might forgive? Is forgiveness even really always justified? For the slave the king tortures in our Gospel, could he or should he have explored a different option? What did the man who was imprisoned think?

One of the great parts of Wiesenthal's book is that it not only has the story, but it has the responses of 53 people, ranging from theologians to journalists and scientists. Some say that Simon should have forgiven the soldier, others that he couldn't have, others that he shouldn't have and still others that are uncertain. I find it significant that of all the 22 respondents who were Jewish, only 2 said they were uncertain. The other 20 responses were NOT to forgive the soldier.

There were of course other responses, but the one which I find most curious is that of an Anglican Bishop. He believed in forgiveness for the soldier. Now, while I found most Christian responses to be intelligent, I was also suspicious of them given that lack of shared faith of those killed in the holocaust. As a Christian, I am hesitant to differ with the majority of Jewish respondents given my distance from their experiences. But I am moved by this bishop's opinion, because the bishop in question was Desmond Tutu. The man who helped oversee the truth and reconciliation movement which worked to heal apartheid, his own and his country's experience of racialized violence.

He responds to Wiesenthal saying, "to the question of forgiveness, I answer by pointing to the fact that people who have been tortured, whose loved ones were abducted, killed, and buried secretly can testify and say they are ready to forgive their perpetrators. It is happening before our very eyes. But there are others who say that they are not ready to forgive, demonstrating that forgiveness is not facile or cheap."

That is the message that I take from our Gospel today. That forgiveness is not facile or cheap. That the hurts we inflict and those inflicted on us are not easily swept away. That the question of how Wiesenthal might have forgiven the soldier is not easily answered, nor is the ending of our parable. Christ's command is to forgive while at the same time we believe in a God of justice. Tutu's final words help me as they acknowledge that retributive justice, a justice that recompenses the sins unjustly committed against another, is needed. But.... Well he writes, "It is clear that if we look only to retributive justice, then we could just as well close up shop. Without forgiveness there is no future."

For now, I hope that if you are ready to do the work of forgiveness wherever it might be in your life, you do so. And for those not ready to forgive; who may believe that they may never be able to forgive or even that someone will never be able to be forgiven, I will not say go out and forgive that person. I will only say that I believe ours is a faith that always hopes towards healing. Not facile or cheap, but real. And I hope that amongst the tools given to us by God, we might use forgiveness to heal where we and this world are broken. Amen.