

“The Slow Work of Forgiveness”

Year A, Lent 1, 3/9/14

Hope Central Church

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Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit, to be tempted by the Devil. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, Jesus was hungry. Then the tempter approached and said, “If you are the only begotten, command these stones to turn into bread.” Jesus replied, “Scripture has it, ‘We live not on bread alone but on every utterance that comes from the mouth of God.’ ” Next the Devil took Jesus to the Holy City, set him on the parapet of the Temple and said, “If you are the only begotten, throw yourself down. scripture has it, ‘God will tell the angels to take care of you; with their hands they will support you that you may never stumble on a stone.’ ” Jesus answered, “Scripture also says, ‘Do not put God to the test.’ ”

The Devil then took Jesus up a very high mountain and displayed all the dominions of the world in their magnificence, promising, “All these I will give you if you fall down and worship me.” At this, Jesus said to the Devil, “Away with you, Satan! Scripture says, ‘You will worship the Most High God; God alone will you adore.’ ” At that the Devil left, and angels came and attended Jesus.

We are beginning our Lenten journey of exploring the slow work of forgiveness this Sunday morning. It is a large body of work to explore and I want to lay out some of the territory for us. There are three of us who will preach in Lent, Courtney Jones, Ben Perkins, and me. We have met over the last two months, with Barbara McQueen, convener of the Called to Care Team (our pastoral care team) and with the worship planning team, to pool our wisdom, to pray for our congregation this Lent, to collectively ask God to guide us and protect us in our work together.

Please, will you pray with me?

So many of us grew in Christianities that told us we were ontologically sinful, sinful at birth and by nature. If we didn’t work hard against our sinful nature, we would sin every day, willy nilly, left and right, with abandon, without consciousness, and perhaps with glee.

I know there must be some for whom sinning is as natural as blinking. I personally don’t know any of them. I see them on TV – like House of Cards. Have you seen the second season yet? O Lord, those are some evil people – and maybe people like that exist really, surely they do – the mortgage scandal that nearly brought down the American economy, the rampant poverty in our

nation and the violence we export abroad – but I don't know any of them personally.

But I know you, and you know me, and as far as I know, that doesn't describe us, our human condition, maybe only because we don't have the imagination or the resources to sin on that huge a scale. Our sins are more moderate.

But still, most of us grew up in religious systems that described us as sinful and helped us understand ourselves as sinful and bad.

It's an old formula, we Christian inherited from the Greeks, to simplify way too much, that we are either one thing or we are another, we are either sinful or we are perfect, either good or bad, and while I'm at it, either male or female, free or slave, and we identify with one or the other. I'd add forgiven or not.

It's not so in other religious systems. In Jewish cosmology, we are not whole unless we understand ourselves to be both good and evil, and capable of both.

Through Christian history tinted glasses, our gospel story for today, the vision quest of Jesus, this hero story has instead been presented as a test that Jesus will fail or not fail. Jesus who has been fasting will either give the right answers to Satan who tempts him to turn stone into bread, to cast himself off a high place to prove God will rescue him, or to worship Satan, all temptations Jesus might be particularly seduced by, or he will give the wrong answers. This story has been presented as a test of Jesus rightness, not wrongness - to prove his goodness, not badness.

This is what we are tempted to, to shoehorn Jesus, and ourselves, into blind alleys of good or bad, right or wrong.

What we are is made for relationship. Recent neuroscience tells us that we have dedicated cells in our brains wired for relationships. When idled from thinking about other things like food or work or sex, those dedicated cells worry about relationships. It's what happens to me in the middle of the night, I wake up worrying, was I mean, did I talk too much, do I like him, does he like me?

Our scripture say so, too, spiritually speaking, we are made for relationships. Much of Paul's writing in Christian scripture, is to congregations he has established, helping them to negotiate relationships between Jews and Gentiles, disputes between one person or another, fighting over religious practices, slights of dignity, wondering who's right and who's wrong.

All of Judaism and Christianity is build on a covenantal relationship between God and God's people. In so much of Hebrew Scripture, when the people are in a mess, when they've hungry, lonely, tired, when they're in exile, they have

forgotten their covenant with God, they have separated themselves from God and from each other. So it was then and so it is now.

In our practices of Christianity, taken from ancient practices are the ways of mending relationships, rites and acts of reconciliation and the restoration of our dignity.

We confess our sins every week, and are reminded of God's pardon. We pass the peace, a sign of our reconciliation. We remember our sins and those who sin against us in the Lord's Prayer. On Shrove Tuesday, Gina, Christie, Nancy, and Daniel stood in for us to confess, and we assured them of God's never ending love and our forgiveness. We did it again on Ash Wednesday.

This slow work of forgiveness – we've been at it for 2000 years if we count back to Jesus and 5000 years if we count back to when Abraham and Sarah immigrated from Ur to Israel. That is to say, we are a part of the long parade of humanity that has been messing up, been messed on, and forgiven or forgiving for centuries. We add our small uniqueness to this parade of humanity, and it is our own unique participation that is the most interesting to us, yes?

I think when we practice these rites and rituals of forgiving and being forgiven, perhaps, until we pay close attention, as were doing this Lent, the full impact and complication of what we've been doing for millennia, feels suddenly, way more complex, way more real.

For example, we've been saying, "forgive us our sins as we forgive others," but then we suddenly understand that forgiving might mean coming to terms with a sibling we've not spoken to in 20 years, or maybe it might mean starting to grapple with the person who assaulted us in all the ways a person can be assaulted, or contend with a church that excluded us. Maybe it means forgiving a person who called us out of our name, using the words designed to most hurt us, dyke, bitch, bastard, cunt, useless, pussy. Or maybe when we say forgive us, it is us who stood by and did nothing, who said the terrible word, who neglected the family while drinking, who drove the car that killed the child, who touched, who punched, who caused irreparable harm. Maybe it was us.

In a culture or a religion that is either black or white, right or wrong, good or bad, maybe we desperately forgot what we did, what another did to us or did to ones we loved because to tell would cause us to be exiled from our community, and it is unbearable to be cast out of the community, or to think or know that we might be purely bad or only evil.

Maybe we haven't really engaged forgiveness or being forgiven, because in the families we grew up in, things we could not bear were done to us and then were treated as something small, and so we don't have a clue if something we do in this moment is as bad as that or is as bad as kicking the dog, or as bad as the

holocaust of 5 million Jews and three more million gypsies, Catholics, disabled folks, and gay men and lesbians. A milk glass broken by a 3 year old was worse than the arm broken by an adult in a rage. And in such a household, perhaps, there was only one victor and the rest were victims, only one right one and a house full of wrong ones.

So why pay this much attention this Lent to the slow work of forgiveness – some of our sins are so small, the stealing of a lipstick or screw driver, cheating at cards, the little social lie, no I can't come to your party or I can't make love with you tonight because I need to wash my hair?

Why pay this much attention to the slow work of forgiveness? Because the practice of Christianity is a communal practice, and communities are made of relationships. I don't think Christianity can be done singly – maybe for retreats, and for short periods of time, but Christianity is practiced in relationships – relationships between God, Jesus, Spirit, and humans. We want our humans and our relationships to be more than two dimensional, to be larger than right or wrong, victor and victim, winner and loser. We want to have the capacity to have relationships in which there are 1000 possible ways to respond to each other.

The health of our congregation and the quality of our spiritual practice depends our ability to forgive small wrongs and grapple with large systemic sins, because we want to be agile, resilient, handle complications of identity, race, gender, class with grace, mercy, kindness that sees and holds the entirety of a person's essential-ness and vast gloriousness. We want to be skillful in complicated and simple relationships.

Another reason we want to pay attention this Lent to the slow work of forgiveness is this – Jesus says in the Gospel of John, I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

I believe this work of forgiveness will help Jesus with the project of helping us have an abundant life. When we worry that we have harmed someone but we don't check it out, it can eat us alive. I carried with me this sin for 38 years and it worried me so, I cannot tell you – until I made a formal confession of this sin to my spiritual director two years ago – it involved me, a 16 year old kissing a younger woman, a 15 year old in public. That's it, the whole sin, but because I buried it, I spent so much time and energy hiding it, that I became that sin, which, in the light of day was no sin. I could have been sleeping instead of waking up all these years worrying what I had done.

So here is our work before us, this Lent, thinking, feeling, knowing, about the slow work of forgiveness.

But I want to lay down some rules or some assumptions for our work together.

1. Safety is our first concern. Please enter this work at the level that is safe for you. You can make moment by moment and day by day decisions for yourself about how deep to go. If you go deeply, you'll want to work with your team of loved ones and professionals. Barbara McQueen and Ben Perkins are compiling a list of resources if you don't have a team, so that you may assemble a team. A member of our Called to Care Team will be present at every service in case you get caught in a hard place. I'll be available after services.
2. Our Lenten work is an invitation to engage forgiveness. You are not required to forgive what or who you do not want or are not ready to forgive. You get to decide if you want to, and when.
3. You do not have to forgive where it is unsafe to forgive. You do not have to engage a process of forgiveness with someone it is unsafe to be with.
4. Forgiveness is different from protecting oneself. When one is being harmed, one has often been given the advice from clergy to go home and forgive. But this is a mis-conceived and sinful use of the practice of Christianity. One is allowed and must protect oneself, body, mind, spirit, and one's children.
5. Forgiveness is a process, a way. When asked how many times one should forgive, Jesus said 490 times. Maybe he meant 490 different sins, but maybe he meant, it can take forgiving the same sin 490 times before one can really completely forgive. Often we forgive another for ourselves first. Later, if we are lucky, we might forgive for the one who sinned against us for their sake.
6. You cannot require forgiveness for another.
7. We do this slow work of forgiveness together, as a people, as a community.

Lastly, I want to read you these promises for our Lent practice – some of you will know these words by heart and some will just hear them today for the first time, but I have borrowed these promises from AA because the work of sobriety and serenity in AA so depend on resilient whole hearted relationships. I hope these promises express and inspire a hope for our congregation this Lent:

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.

Are these extravagant promises? We think not. Amen