Exodus 14:19-31

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

In today’s gospel passage, we have a topic worthy of many sermons, maybe even a sermon series. It is the topic of forgiveness, an issue that affects all of us and all the societies of our world. Jesus talks about forgiveness in exaggerated terms to help us imagine just how expansive the forgiveness God is.

The main figure in today’s story is forgiven ten thousand talents, an amount exceeding a decade’s worth of government revenue in that time. In our time, it would be in the billons! The man, in turn, is owed an amount nowhere near that level but it is not inconsequential: it is about three months’ pay. One would hope that he, in receiving mercy and forgiveness in such lavish terms, would respond in kind. But he does not. He demands full payment. Isn’t that odd? Isn’t it tragic? It seems as if the flow of forgiveness stopped with him.

One of the things at stake in conversations about forgiveness is relationship. Jesus is expressing how it is that God relates to us – through forgiveness, pardon and unrelenting acceptance. And Jesus reflects on how we should therefore relate to one another. There really can be no relating-to-another without forgiving. It is such a necessary commonplace in relationship that Jesus just assumes it in the Lord’s Prayer: “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

How do you hear this phrase? We say it every week. Do you hear a conditional quality to it: forgive us as we forgive? We seem to be asking God to forgive our flaws only to the degree that we forgive others. I do not believe this is what Jesus meant. It makes God out to be only as good as I am. It imagines God measuring out for me only as much forgiveness as I am able to produce for others.

What I believe it means is something else: that we can receive forgiveness only to the degree that we are forgiving souls. It’s like saying you can see only to the extent that you open your eyes. If they’re closed; you don’t see. If they’re open, you do. If you forgive, you are much better able to receive forgiveness. And without forgiveness, resentment thrives.

You’ve probably heard the definition of resentment. It’s like drinking rat poison and waiting for the other person to die. At some point or other in our lives, we all have to deal with resentment. Hopefully it remains on the housekeeping level – something we sweep out of our souls whenever it crops up. But sometimes a person has had a life so bitter; so damaging that it is God who is resented. Or it is God who is blamed. That’s OK; God still loves that one. But he or she may actually have to forgive God. Not because God has done wrong, but because the resentment needs to be addressed and dismantled. If our relationship with God is as intimate as Jesus invites – God as parent – then it makes sense that we might need to forgive God from time to time. Because we love to blame others – even God – when things go wrong.

We usually talk about forgiving those who have harmed us by some action. Have you thought about the need to forgive someone for simply being who he or she ***is***? Maybe that person has such a toxic outlook on life or has such a dysfunctional personality that all we can do is offer a blank check of forgiveness for that one. There’s a bonus to this: it forestalls judgment. It precludes the need to constantly rehearse in our minds the specific flaws and faults of that person. Then we can move to gentle acceptance, even if we chose not to have a relationship with that person, perhaps for our own safety or sanity.

Though forgiveness is to relationship what a few quarts of oil are to your car, we do not have to relate to everyone. Relationship is optional; loving is not. We are to love our neighbor as our self and pray for our enemies. That pretty much covers everyone on the planet: no one is exempt from our love. So I would be cautious about dismissing relationship, even while recognizing that in some cases it is advised.

When forgiveness seems impossible, we can ask for help in *wanting* to forgive. Someone who was practiced in that prayer was Holocaust survivor and Christian, Corrie ten Boom. She was a Dutch watchmaker but is best known for her book, *The Hiding Place*. She and her family sheltered many Jews during World War Two but they paid dearly for their efforts. Corrie was imprisoned with her sister, Betsie, as were a number of their family members. Corrie was released from Ravensbruck, one of the concentration camps, but Betsie died there.

After the war, Corrie began an intentional process of forgiving. Eventually she believed she had discovered the only power that could heal the people of Europe. She traveled through her native Holland, as well as France and even Germany, preaching about the God who forgives.

She writes about one preaching stint in Munich. “It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander’s mind, I liked to think that’s where forgiven sins are thrown. ‘When we confess our sins,’ I said, ‘God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever.’ Solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

“And that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw him in an overcoat and brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man, leering. I could see my sister’s frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin.

“Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: ‘A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’

“And I,” Corrie said, “who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among thousands of women? But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“‘You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,’ he was saying, ‘I was a guard there.’ No, he did not remember me. ‘But since that time,’ he went on, ‘I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein,’ again the hand came out — ‘will you forgive me?’

“And I stood there—I whose sins had again and again been forgiven—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place—could this man erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

“For I had to do it—I knew that. I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had run a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

“And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. ‘Help!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You, dear Lord, supply the feeling.’

“And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’ For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

That excerpt is from an article Corrie ten Boom wrote called, “I’m Still Learning to Forgive,” published in 1972, almost 30 years after the war. Maybe she wasn’t still learning to forgive as much as she was keeping past forgiveness valid by refusing to re-engage with her woundedness. Wounds don’t leave. Forgiveness heals them but wounds remain a part of our history.

I have never had to forgive on such a scale as Corrie. I hope I never have to. But I know people who have. Mostly it is women whose bodies were violated in childhood by a family member, often their fathers. And Corrie ten Boom is right. Those who forgive move outside of their damage and live fulfilling lives. They become models of hope and redemption. We do not have to be defined – or limited – by our wounds. Those who do not forgive remain bitter. Not to forgive is to suffer endlessly the torment of yesterday even as it devours the present and future. Only forgiveness sets us free.

1. www.familylifeeducation.org/gilliland/procgroup/CorrieTenBoom.htm, excerpted from “I’m Still Learning to Forgive” by Corrie ten Boom, *Guideposts* Magazine, (Carmel, New York; 1972). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)