

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
September 14, 2014

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I FORGIVE?

With each act of forgiveness, whether small or great, we move toward wholeness.

Desmond and Mpho Tutu

This quote is from one of my most deeply respected heroes, Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho Tutu. Together they have recently written *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. Under apartheid in South Africa, and as chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Desmond Tutu has witnessed imaginably some of the worst crimes human beings can inflict on others. Up until 1994 and its first democratic election, South Africa was a country that institutionalized racism, inequality and oppression. Desmond Tutu says there are days he wishes he could erase from his mind all of the horrors he witnessed and recognizes there is no end to the creative ways we humans find to hurt one another and no end to the reasons we feel justified in doing so. But to the contrary, he also sees no end to the human capacity for healing and our innate ability to find hope in the most hopeless of situations. Tutu confesses two simple truths he holds: *1. There is nothing that cannot be forgiven and 2. There is no one undeserving of forgiveness.* His basis is an understanding that we are bound together – whether by birth, circumstance, or by our shared humanity. Tutu’s voice was clear under apartheid in South Africa and relentless: there is no future without forgiveness. Our rage and our quest for revenge would have been our destruction. This is as true for us individually as it is for us globally, he writes. Whether it is the tormentor who tortured me brutally, the spouse who betrayed me, the boss who passed me over for a promotion, or the driver who cut me off this morning, Tutu understands we face the same choice: to forgive or to seek revenge.

This is hard to grasp, if we are fully honest this morning. Needless to say, I am also reminded of an example that cuts very close to home for us. It is the story of Amy

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Biehl, a Stanford student who in 1992, won a Fulbright scholarship and decided to go to South Africa to work in the struggle to end apartheid. In 1993, she drove into a township where her car was stopped by an angry mob that had just emerged from a political meeting to

protest the police slaying of a young black boy. Amy Biehl's passion for justice and her purpose for being in South Africa were certainly not evident on her face. To those protestors, she was just another white person, another symbol of apartheid oppression. They dragged her from her vehicle and beat, stoned and stabbed her to death. Amy was 26.

In 1998, the four young men convicted of her murder were granted amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission chaired by Desmond Tutu. Amy's parents, Linda and Peter Biehl, not only supported this decision but went on to establish the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust in Cape Town, South Africa, a charity devoted to fighting violence and assisting the very community where Amy was murdered. Two of the men now work for the foundation named after the woman they killed and have a close relationship with Linda Biehl, forming a unique bond. (Peter Biehl has since died)¹

It is truly hard to imagine how this happens and how it is possible to move beyond such pain and grief to the desire to create meaning out of suffering, to move forward and heal after such a devastating tragedy. None of this is easy by any means, but Desmond Tutu contends it is still what makes us human, this need to fix what is broken, repair relationships and seek understanding and a larger purpose when we have lost something or someone dear to us. Certainly, there are other stories like Amy Biehl's where people have realized that more violence and destruction can never ultimately bring peace. Hatred and vengeance is real, and certainly still exists in our

¹ As reported in *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*.

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world this we know, but that cannot be the story of our lives and of our human purpose on earth.

While I have difficulty with comprehending the practice of forgiveness in such tragic circumstances, and perhaps you to do, I appreciate the truthfulness of which Desmond Tutu speaks about what forgiveness is not.

Forgiveness is not weakness. We all aspire to be forgiving people and esteem those who find it in their hearts to forgive, whether parents forgiving the killers of their daughter, a woman forgiving her rapist or a man forgiving those who have tortured him. We do not see these people as weak – forgiveness is not spineless nor does it mean one does not get angry. Yet, it is a remarkable feat to be able to see past the inhumanity of the behavior and recognize – still – the humanity of the person committing the atrocious acts. This is not weakness, but heroic strength, the noblest strength of the human spirit.

Forgiveness is not a subversion of justice. There are those who believe an injustice can be made right only when someone is made to pay for the harm they have caused. The truth is that people will always live with the consequences of their actions. In Northern Ireland, a BBC documentary called *Facing the Truth* brought together victims and perpetrators of that region's violent conflict. Unlike the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, there was no power to grant amnesty to perpetrators. In fact, the perpetrators who came forward seeking forgiveness had been tried and convicted of their crimes and had completed prison sentences. Still they came not to challenge justice but to seek forgiveness. So often, even after justice has been served, many people find the story hasn't ended and no one has found a route to a new beginning. Forgiveness is the only way out of the trap that injury creates.

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Forgiveness is not forgetting. Some find forgiveness difficult because they believe forgiveness means forgetting the pain they have suffered. Forgiving does not mean forgetting the harm or denying the harm or pretending the harm did not happen or the injury is as bad as it was. The cycle of forgiveness can be activated and completed only in truth and honesty. It requires giving voice to the violations and naming the pains that have been suffered. Forgiveness does not mean that we pretend things are anything other than they are. There is history, and we are not served by forgetting our history. There is always risk in forgiving, and just as we take leaps of faith in our lives whether to marry, to divorce, to move, to take a new job, we also take a leap of faith when we commit to the practice of forgiving.

Forgiveness is not easy. Forgiving can seem too overwhelming, too complicated to even consider. How do we forgive if there has been no apology or explanation for why someone has hurt us? How do we think of forgiving when we feel the person or perpetrators have done anything to deserve our forgiveness? Forgiveness is not an effortless act for any of us, and it does serve anyone to minimize the complexity in the work of forgiving. It is best to break it down into small pieces, and begin from wherever we are standing. Tell our story for as long as we need to. Forgiving is not easy, but it is a path to healing. It was not easy for Nelson Mandela to spend 27 years in prison, but when people say to Desmond Tutu what a waste that was; he says it was not a waste. It took 27 years for him to be transformed from an angry, unforgiving young radical into an icon of reconciliation, forgiveness, and honor who would lead a country back from the brink of civil war and self-destruction. Even our suffering, our pain and our losses have the power to transform us though it does not feel just or easy.²

The question to Jesus from one of his disciples in our gospel this morning – how often should I forgive? – is yet another opportunity for us to explore forgiveness as it speaks to our relationships with those we love, with strangers, with enemies, with ourselves,

² As written, though condensed from *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*.

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with God, with the world and with our respective communities. It is also an invitation of sorts for people of Christian faith to seek to live in such a way that is consistent with Jesus' life and teachings. More broadly, we know that all of the major world religions have something to say about the necessity of forgiveness. And, more recently, the medical and scientific world has even begun to dig into the importance of forgiveness for health and well-being. It is in fact widely known that unforgiveness or holding onto past hurts and resentments deeply affects our emotional and physical well-being. As is often the case in the Christian narrative, Jesus speaks to many virtues and today to the necessity of forgiveness because of the effects that unforgiveness can have not only on individuals, but on entire communities as well. To be sure, he often uses, as in this gospel of Matthew today, parables to shock us and startle us. The unending torture meted out by

the king in today's story is not to be understood in a literal sense. Jesus concluding comment plays on hyperbole – exaggerated statements that were so often part of his discourse and ministry – to make a point. It is there to awaken us, to insist on the importance of forgiveness and not simplistically to identify God as a torturer. Some would suggest that at a much deeper level the central hyperbole of this parable is the word of grace, the initial grace of the king, which should engender gratitude. This very grace renders obscene the actions of the unforgiving servant, who having been forgiven his own impossible debt, seizes on the throat of his fellow servant and demands repayment of a miniscule one. Sounds so ridiculous to us doesn't it? But of course, this is where the parable turns on us as it did on Peter, the disciple. How often should I forgive? How could you ask such a question? You know how much you have already been forgiven. The psalm that Richard read for us today is an example of an exuberant outburst of a person who clearly knows very well what it is to be forgiven, who really does believe in a gracious and loving God, who has experienced God's mercy washing over them like a gentle rain, and whose life, as a result, has been opened up to a whole new world of possibilities. This psalm is full of profound imagery that

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gives expression to both the depth of human predicament and the overwhelming abundance of God's grace.

In preparing for this sermon today, and my own encounter with a God of compassion and forgiveness, with a God of steadfast love and mercy, a God who values relationship over retribution, a God who keeps reaching out and reclaiming me, and us, has given me great pause as it so often does. In the midst of all of the realities of the spectrum of ongoing violence and conflict in our world perpetrated on us and that which we perpetrate, whether it is ISIS or the NFL, how do I negotiate an understanding of forgiveness that leads to some act of transformation in others and myself? I haven't quite figured that out yet but I have been reminded that I have much to ponder and work on. I am learning to see though, that without forgiveness, we continue to create patterns of violence and hurt that get repeated over and over again – in organizations, in cities, in neighborhoods and between countries for not only decades, but centuries.

And so, I leave you with where I started – with the inspiration of Desmond and Mpho Tutu to consider that we must walk our own paths, at our own pace. All of us write our own books of forgiving every single day. They ask us: What will be in my book, in your book? The forgiveness we seek, whether it is for ourselves or another will never be found in a book. We carry it with us in our hearts, in our humanity. Here, write Desmond and Mpho, we listen to what the heart hears.

Here is my book of forgiving, the pages are well worn. Here are the places I struggled; here are the places I passed through with ease. Here is my book of forgiving, some of its pages are tear-stained and torn; some are decorated with joy and laughter. Some of its pages are written with hope, some are etched with despair. This is my book of forgiving, this book is full of stories and secrets. It tells how I finally broke free from being defined by injury and chose to become a creator again, offering forgiveness, accepting that I am forgiven, creating a world of peace.