

WRESTLING TO FORGIVE

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler, Sub-Dean of General Seminary,
at Grace Church, New York City,
on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, 14 September 2008
Year A, Proper 19: Ecclesiasticus 27.30-28.7; Matthew 18.21-35; [Romans 14.5-12]

I heard a radio interview with an Englishman who was taken prisoner of war by the Japanese during World War II.

The book is just partly about his experiences as a prisoner.
It is mostly about his later search for his Japanese interrogator
and about what happened when he finally found him.

"Lord, how often should I forgive?" Peter asks Jesus.
That's a question we all ask in the rough and tumble of life.
Or, even if we don't ask it, the question is out there
countless times in our various experiences of hurt.
"Should I forgive this person?"
"Am I really supposed to forgive now, yet again?"

I've not read the book by the former prisoner of war,
and I heard only part of the radio interview —
it was conducted by Terry Gross on National Public Radio —
but the little I heard was moving.

I believe he was taken prisoner during the battle of the bridge over the river Kwai.
We're all familiar with the fact that life as a prisoner of war under the Japanese
was a life of unremitting brutality and, often, atrocity.
Assigned to this prisoner was a soldier who was termed his "interpreter,"
but he was really his interrogator and, often, his tormenter.
Over a fairly long period of time, the prisoner came to know this interrogator well —
where he came from, what his work had been, and so forth.

Well, the British prisoner survived the war and went back to England to rebuild his life.
He married, completed his education, entered a profession (I didn't hear what he did for a
living), and got about his life.

It was not until the 80s, 40 years after the end of the war,
that he began to think about trying to locate his interrogator.
He did so because he realized how traumatic and pivotal his wartime experience had been
in his life,
and he realized the enormous anger he still bore toward his tormenter.
His search for the interrogator was motivated at first, he said, by a desire for revenge —
he used to imagine the harm he might like to do if ever he found him.

Then, one day, quite by chance he realized he had found his man —
he came across a newspaper story about him;
it included a photograph that enabled him to verify that it was the same man,
and it had enough geographical information to get an address.

It was the former prisoner's wife who wrote the first letter,
 and that letter gave the former interrogator quite a start.
 Well, one thing led to another, and the two of them agreed to meet —
 actually at one end of the present bridge over the Kwai River,
 at a certain time on a certain day, sometime in the 1990s.
 The former prisoner was there early,
 and at the appointed time he saw a small, older, Japanese man walking toward
 him over the bridge.
 They greeted each other.
 And the first thing the former interrogator said was how sorry he was for all that he had
 done.
 He explained how he had felt part of a system that forced him to be brutal,
 how his superiors had warned him when they thought he was too lenient,
 how he felt his family was at risk if he did not follow orders.
 Even before the meeting, the former prisoner's desire for revenge
 had begun to change into something else —
 something less hostile, something more open, something more creative.
 Ultimately, it turned into forgiveness.

The story put me in mind of my Uncle Franklin,
 my mother's brother and only sibling,
 who spent three years as a prisoner of war of the Japanese,
 three years when his family and his fiancé did not know whether he was dead or
 alive.
 At the end of the war, there he was, still alive, but just barely.
 His health was permanently affected, but he did marry and have children, my three
 cousins.
 I heard about the war every time I saw him.
 He died a number of years ago.
 Was he ever able to forgive? — I don't know.
 Over the years, my sister has gotten quite involved in an educational partnership with
 Japanese schools.
 At one point our aunt asked her, "How can you travel to Japan and be involved in this
 project after what those people did to your uncle?"

**Peter and Jesus had in mind not the geopolitical issues of war and peace,
 but the more daily, personal challenges to forgive.**
 And when Peter asks about how many times he should forgive his brother,
 the sense is that he is concerned about the fellowship of faith,
 or, as our translation has it, another member of the church.
 But I tell those stories from World War II,
 partly because I believe Jesus' words do apply to such events,
 mostly just to show how the issue of forgiveness can affect the whole of our lives.
**Peter's question, "How often should I forgive?"
 can become *the* pivotal question for the whole of a life.**

It actually is a pivotal question for all of us in our lives.

Life is a hurting experience in so many ways.

Relationships are complex, we inevitably get hurt in them as conflicts arise —
 conflicts with neighbors and friends,
 conflicts with colleagues and bosses in the work place,
 conflicts in marriages and families —
 and we find ourselves in complex tangles of anger, hurt, resentment —
 and longing for reconciliation,
longing for a reconciliation that often seems unattainable.

**"Forgive your neighbor the hurt he does you," Sirach writes,
 "and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven."**

Jesus taught his disciples to pray,

"Forgive us our sins *as we forgive those who sin against us.*"

In today's parable, Jesus concludes:

"So my heavenly Father will treat each of you
 unless you *forgive* your brother or sister from your heart."

It sounds like a deal or a threat,

but it's much more than that.

God is about the business of *reconciling*, not simply making us feel better.

So when we ask God's forgiveness,

**we need to be open to that reconciling movement of God through us,
 which means being open to the painful business of confessing and
 forgiving.**

*Our relationship with God and our relationships with each other
 are all bound up together:*

we can't cozy up to God and at the same time leave our neighbor out in the cold.

So what does it mean to forgive someone?

In the story of the unmerciful servant,

Jesus uses the idea of **debt** — something owed:

payment is expected,

but in the case of forgiveness the debt is cancelled without payment.

Debt is so true of the wounds of life:

when we feel hurt, we do feel *owed*:

the one who injured me should come across with something for me,

I expect some kind of reparation.

Forgiveness doesn't mean just forgetting the debt:

when we say so easily, "Forget it," we're usually deciding simply to *avoid* dealing
 with something that bothers us,

and that avoidance brings distance into a relationship that has been close.

Forgiving someone is an act of will

**in which we *renounce* the expectation of payment,
 we actually cancel the debt.**

When we forgive we are saying to the one who has hurt us,

"I know you hurt me, but I accept you back into full relationship with me;

I am reaching out to you, and I want you to know that I still love you."
Reconciliation is a two-way street, of course:
 it's a lot easier to forgive
 when we hear confession and repentance from the other person.
 But even so, forgiving is always hard,
 for it means stepping out into insecurity,
 trusting that in giving up what we're owed we will enter upon a new fulfillment in
 relationship.
 It can feel **absurd**, for such forgiveness is certainly not the way of the world.

**Where can we find the strength for the absurd and frightening step of forgiving
 someone who has hurt us very deeply?**

We find that strength in the absurdity of God.
 Jesus' parable is about that, for he told an *absurd* story:
 the 10,000 talents owed by the first servant to the king was worth millions of
 dollars in our money —
 the sort of debt Donald Trump or Bill Gates would incur —
 but the sum for which that servant throttled his colleague was no more than
 several hundred dollars.

The contrast is absurd.

Jesus is saying:

**If you truly realize how much God has forgiven you,
 if you truly realize how completely dependent you are on God's mercy,
 if you receive that forgiveness as a free gift rather than as a right,
 you *won't* carp at all the wrongs you've suffered from others,
 but you will joyfully participate in God's great work of reconciliation,
 forgiving others as you yourself have been forgiven.**

"As many as seven times?"

As many as seventy times?

There may be seven hurts, there may be seventy hurts.

There may be just one hurt, and the challenge may be to forgive that one hurt seven
 times, seventy times, or seven times seventy times.

Someone was talking with me about a family situation of hurt that had spanned quite a
 number of years.

And she talked about how, for her, forgiving has been a matter of being somewhere along
 a spectrum between not forgiving at all and totally forgiving —
 sometimes she's here at the unforgiving end, sometimes further along toward
 forgiving, but still struggling,
 sometimes she feels pretty well reconciled, but then later may go back into a hard
 time again.

My guess is that all of us experience that in one relationship or another:

we think we've forgiven someone else,
 but then something happens to rouse our resentment all over again,
 so we have to go over the ground again, whether within ourselves or in
 conversation again with the one we feel hurt us.

And we wonder whether we've ever made any progress at all.

**That's okay with God,
God understands that,
God accepts that.**

We do hurt each other, often terribly.

The struggle to forgive is just that, a struggle.

In the midst of it,

*God stands with us as our constant companion,
reaching out to us in forgiveness,
inviting us to reach out to others in forgiveness
that we all may be whole
and that God's reconciling love may be known.*

And now to God who sits upon the throne, and to Christ the Lamb,
be worship and praise, dominion and splendor forever and forevermore. Amen.