

Enrolling in Forgiveness School

Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany; February 24, 2019

I just happened across a writer named Debie Thomas, a bright and thoughtful young woman who is the director for children's ministries at an Episcopal church in Palo Alto and who writes for the online newsletter *Journey with Jesus*. She seems to be one of those young folks that have it so much more together and are so much more aware than I ever was at their age. Or than I am now, for that matter.

In her essay on today's readings, she opened with "When I looked up the lectionary readings for this week, the first thing I did was flinch, and the second thing I did was tell God he has an obnoxious sense of humor. I did these things because the readings are about forgiveness, and I'm afraid to write about forgiveness while I struggle to practice it in my own life."

It is comforting to know that I am not alone in considering forgiveness, true, from the heart, no-really-I-mean-it forgiveness to be as unattainable a goal as scoring 450 in Skee-ball. I mean really. Do good to those who hate you? Don't judge? Don't condemn? Forgive? Have you *met me??*

Anne Lamott says that for her, forgiveness has become her most important quest, confessing that forgiving is not her strong suit by saying "I always joke that I wasn't one of those Christians who was heavily into forgiveness- that I was the other kind; that I was reform. But it's so awful to be a person who doesn't forgive. In my experience, the willingness to change down deep always comes from the pain of not changing." She points out that not forgiving is toxic, and the alternative, following Jesus' directions in today's gospel, will be the hardest work that we'll ever do. She says "I really believe that earth is forgiveness school- I really believe that's why they brought us here and then left us without any owner's manual. I think we're here to learn forgiveness."

It's such a hard lesson to learn. How can we be expected to forgive, to do good to those whom we perceive to hate us.

Ms Thomas wonders too, She asks, "So, what can I say about forgiveness? I who am still struggling to forgive deep hurts from my past- hurts inflicted by a misogynistic church, a fear-and-violence based upbringing, the honor-and-shame culture that shaped my early adulthood? What can we say about forgiveness? We, living in the world of Trump, #MeToo, mass shootings, child detention centers, ongoing racial violence and sexual abuse scandals? Perhaps", she wonders, "we must begin by saying what forgiveness is not."

And forgiveness is not denial. Forgiveness isn't pretending that an offense doesn't matter, or that a wound doesn't hurt. And although our faith calls on us to forgive, the deacon in all of us would hopefully remember that we are also called, as the essay reminds us, "to first mourn, to

lament, to burn with zeal and to hunger and thirst for justice.” She says “forgiveness in the Christian tradition...works hand in hand with the arduous work of repentance and transformations. In other words, there is nothing godly about responding to systemic evil with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity.”

Henri Nouwen wrote that forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly, and so we need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. He said that forgiveness is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.

One of the many discussions that circulates inside the capital-C church is the concept of abundance and scarcity. You especially hear it a lot during Stewardship campaigns and in budget planning meetings. We ask ourselves are we operating out of a sense of scarcity, hoarding what we have so we can just keep on keeping on, or are we sharing and growing with a sense of abundance? The difference does change our hearts.

Debie Thomas has realized that, at least for her, forgiveness can be that transformed way of seeing. In the Genesis story about Joseph, when he forgives his brothers he reframes the narrative, understanding that “God is always and everywhere in the business of taking the worst things that happen to us and going to work on them for the purposes of multiplying wholeness and blessing”. She concludes with the hope that “because God is in the story, we can rest assured that our stories don’t end in loss and trauma. There will be another turn, another chapter, another path, another grace. As Jesus promises his listeners, the measure that we give will be given back to us. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over. Because God loves us, we don’t have to forgive out of scarcity, but rather out of God’s abundance.”

So, why did the lectionary dump all of these forgiveness lessons in our lap? Why now? They probably should have come with the starred heading “Caution. Spoiler alert.” We have one more week of *The fill in the blank Sunday after Epiphany* and then it’s Ash Wednesday. Lent begins, walking us to Holy Week and to the greatest example of heartfelt, no more excuses forgiveness.

Around this time every year I start feeling a sense of imperativeness, a need to start getting my ducks in a row, getting my spiritual house in order. As I have said before, I’m really not a person who tends to embrace a penitential, cross-based theology- I’m more of a sunny, empty tomb type- but Lent sets me back on my heels and I welcome the opportunity to dig deeper. And just as a public service announcement, we offer many of those opportunities here at St Peter’s, evening prayer, stations, our new Lenten Prayer Ribbons that can be hung outside throughout Lent and the book study during Adult Forum. I encourage you to take advantage of what speaks to you.

One of the scenes in the musical Hamilton that affects me the most comes towards the end. Alexander and Eliza have suffered great loss. They've grown apart. They each mourn alone. And then their hands touch and a miracle is born. Forgiveness.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Forgive us when we hate what you love. Forgive us when we would rather anesthetize ourselves than feel anything. Forgive us when we squander the grace and freedom you have given us. Forgive us for our self-centered lives. Forgive us for the pride we exhibit in our political life together. Forgive us for how much we resent in others the same things we hate in ourselves. Forgive us for the terrible things we think about our own bodies, bodies you have made in your image. God, we praise you that your grace and mercy and forgiveness toward us is our one true source of our forgiveness toward others. Forgiven people forgive people and God, we thank you for guiding the way toward this kind of freedom. You who perfected enemy love have given us your own heart. May we more and more become what we receive.

Amen.