

SLIDE 1 - Forgiveness

Today's gospel invites us to live in the manner of Jesus, choosing the good, so that our lives become weighted toward overcoming evil in a much better way than the use of violence which is the way of the world. Jesus talks about loving enemies, turning the other cheek, and offering mercy. Jesus is about forgiveness and inclusion as a better way which can mitigate the danger of becoming evil ourselves.

Edna Hong, Lutheran author and translator, rightly describes forgiveness as a work as well as a grace, or gift from God. It is a way of being in the world that demands practice.

Ed Friedman, a Rabbi and family therapist, in a lecture on the level of maturity in society suggests that people rarely achieve 100% maturity, and perhaps only will reach 70% maturity if they are working at it throughout their adult life. Without personal effort levels of maturity will not even reach 50%. Hong's and Friedman's observations help us to see the importance of practicing mercy in our lives as Christians.

As human beings we expend much energy protecting ourselves rather than practicing the faith as Jesus teaches. We want to be right rather than do the long suffering work of loving those who would do us in, who speak ill of us, who do harm physically, or who steal from us. Our instinct is to fight rather than forgive. Yet there are examples of forgiveness in our world. The Forgiveness Project, founded in 2004, is one organization that provides resources and experiences for people to help examine and overcome their grievances. The following story is from the Forgiveness Project.

Margot was 8 years old when her parents moved the family from South America to Canada in order to raise their children in a safer environment. But when Margot was 16 years old her father was murdered during an armed robbery at the store where he worked. Life for the family unraveled. Soon Margot moved out of the home unable to bear life without her father, unable to bear the sudden uncertainty.

Margot recalled how just three days after her Dad was shot a journalist came to their home and asked her mother, “Do you ever think you’ll be able to forgive the (shooter)? Without hesitation her mother said, ‘Yes, I forgive him so that I can live.’ The statement of her mother was true but difficult to live into. As it turned out, such bold claims and the many issues that came with this disruption to the family landed her mother in the hospital. One year after the shooting her mother spent 12 months hospitalized.

Margot herself got caught in patterns of self-destructive behaviors for several years. She managed to achieve a University degree in English and Philosophy in the middle of that time. She got married but two daughters later the marriage ended. She recalls being turned in on herself in pain and bitterness. Any injustice which would occur in her life became linked to her festering anger.

Then, Margot says, poetry saved her. She created an ideal job for herself using poetry as a form of healing to help others with their grief. She created courses and published several books on the subject of healing from grief before she was healed herself. She received an award for one of her publications on healing. Her self-perception up to this time was that nothing ever really worked out for her, but this award allowed her to see herself as a person of value again.

At first Margot hated the very notion of forgiveness. “To tell someone who is in pain to forgive is brutal. Forgiveness can’t be prescriptive.” One day as she presented her material on grief a member of the audience spoke about how she had chosen to forgive the perpetrator of a heinous crime and Margot began to wonder if she had been too narrow minded about her own life. When she began to consider forgiveness as a pathway for her life, she noticed how her whole body began to feel different, more complete, and more at peace.

Then something else unexpected happened. She was contacted by the shooter’s family. The man who had shot and killed her father during a robbery had served his prison term, had transformed his life while in prison, and was interested in contacting the family of his victim. Margot opened herself to exchanging emails.

Margot found the emails with the man to be filled with humanity. The messages from this man began to heal her. Months later they agreed to meet face to face. There were tears, weeping and hugs shared. Meeting with the perpetrator was

powerful. She felt her whole self becoming more and more complete. She learned a new word from this man who was also working on restoration. The man signed his emails with the Zulu work, 'sawbonna' which means "I see you" indicating a recognition of the other's shared humanity.

In this story we have the work that is forgiveness and the gift that is an example of grace. For 20 years Margot struggled with the demons of loss, uncertainty and anger. She began to know healing through her work with words and poetry. An example of real life forgiveness propelled her to a greater openness to healing. And the unexpected contact with her father's killer, a man also seeking the freedom of forgiveness, brought her to an experience of new life.

Today we hear the words of Jesus that follow his introductory blessings and woes. The first words in today's gospel are this, "Are you still listening? Are you still listening since you just heard how the kingdom of God is about reversals? The poor shall become rich in that they will receive what they need, and the rich will become poor in that they will empty their storehouses so that no one has too much, and no one has too little, and all have enough. Perhaps Jesus asks this because he can see that some have begun to turn away from him, resisting his words.

The author Reynold Price writes about the end of a woman's life in *Ardent Spirits*, her adult children had quietly gathered around her. Nevill, one of her son's, had waited "as long as he could before having to return...he went in to kiss her sleeping head goodbye. She showed no response and he turned to leave. As he touched the latch of her door, though, there came the sudden sound of her voice, 'Nevill, remember – I only regret my economies.'" The mother regretted how she had managed her resources. She regretted the times she was frugal with her hospitality, stingy with her affection, and miserly in her help of those in need.

Jesus addresses those who are economical when it comes to whom they will love, bless or pray for, and those they consider worthy of mercy. We know this because he asks if they are still willing to listen to what he has to teach. Jesus addresses those who are prone to invite to dinner those who will return the favor, those who will befriend those who look and sound like they do, and lend only to those who will pay back with interest. Jesus knows that forgiveness and loving enemies

and showing mercy are not easy. No human can reach a state of forgiveness and stay in that condition, and never be resentful again.

No, we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. We are at odds with God which we know clearly because Jesus stands in opposition to us as he offers his critique. We think we are due credit not only from others but from God, enough credit to put us in God's eternal graces. Even Christ's hand-picked apostles feuded with one another in the book of Acts. Jesus tells those who are still listening that they are no better than sinners. Hearing this they know, and we know what must happen. We who hear must repent, turn away from ourselves, face God, and look to him for help.

SLIDE 2 – Change of Heart

Forgiveness is a work as well as a grace and it is a work we will never be done with on this side of life. Luther said forgiveness takes place in two ways: inwardly in the heart and outwardly in (daily actions) works of forgiveness. Luther would be the last to say that either of these ways is easy. To forgive, he said, is "pulling Christ into the flesh" and that "Christ can never be pulled into the flesh deep enough." Forgiveness means a radical change of heart. It means becoming a different person, and new person, and yet a person who may also backslide, and stand in need of renewal, again.

Jesus taught his apostles, the larger community of disciples, and the multitude of the entire region that all must repent, turn away from the things that tend towards evil, and face him, and look to him for help. The night before Jesus taught he humbled himself praying the whole night. Having been in communion with God, being anointed with the Spirit, Jesus came down the mountain to the people to speak. It is not just the example of Jesus that is here, but the truth that Jesus lives in communion with God and the Holy Spirit. Therefore in Jesus we find one who blesses those who curse him and prays for those who sought to kill him. With great mercy Jesus loved his enemies.

It was out of love and with the presence of the Spirit Jesus spoke the words of today's text to the crowd. It was out of mercy and love for humankind that Jesus gave his life on the cross and God the Father spoke Jesus to life from the tomb. It is by the gift of the Spirit that we are gathered today to hear the good news that Jesus' death and resurrection are for us. It is by the gift of the Spirit that we come

to know that God's economies --life out of death, forgiveness for sinners, and mercy for all --are good news for us and for all peoples.

Edna Hong, in her book *Forgiveness Is a Work as well as a Grace*, lifts up the work that the Holy Spirit creates in her as the willingness to forgive. Hong wrote, "I can never in all eternity forgive as God forgives, but the Holy Spirit can penetrate my weak will and make my impotent I a potent we that engages in the work of forgiveness and reconciliation in the world, starting in my own family and neighborhood and church."

"The Holy Spirit infuses my poor, pinched, human willingness to forgive and makes it a divinely genuine willingness to which the one I weakly willed to forgive cannot say, "No, thanks." Spirit power is the only power that makes hearts able to join hands again. "To be forgiven and to know it is to change—by the help of the Spirit....It is to act."

Hong described the church as the community that is filled with flawed people in need of mercy and grace. The church is the place where the Word is spoken that tells us of God's will for us and that challenges our own wills that are set on being right in our own minds eye. "The church and nowhere else" wrote Hong is the place "we meet the forgiving Christ in the Lord's Supper. There more than anywhere else is our greatest hope for the change of heart that we know we need but are snail-slow about changing."

More than this Hong reminds us of the paradox within Christian community. The church at once provides us with the means of grace that sets us free and forgives us when we misuse this grace. The church provides forgiveness for us for not turning in God's pardoning love and going home from church to be pardoning love. The church forgives us for resisting the means of grace which can lead us to forgive others. God patiently waits for us to love and forgive one another as God's grace has forgiven us.

We meet the forgiving Christ when we gather as the church in the study of the Word, in engagement in prayer, through acts of mercy, in worship, in any work where joined with the power of the Spirit our hearts are changed and transformed. We are found listening when we practice forgiveness, when we see humanity in others and include them, and keep turning to Christ.