

The Rev. Kate Byrd
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Life with Toddlers, a Lesson on Forgiveness

As a mother of multiples, those being our twin boys Patrick and Thomas, I feel like I get a birds eye view into the dynamics of humanity, for two reasons. One, because my boys are now three. The age at which the full capacity for human emotion and vulnerability is laid out wide open for all the world to see. For the mere fact that they have no filter. And, two, because, well . . . , there are two of them who, for the most part, live and move and have their being alongside one another. Which means they display whatever they are feeling towards one another whenever and wherever they want. Take for example this scenario we have been enduring for over a week, in which Patrick comes up behind his brother Thomas, for no discernable reason, and swats him on the back. At which point, of course, Thomas yelps. Causing Patrick to immediately turn around and say "I say sorry to Thomas," looking his brother straight in the face, and saying sorry, as Thomas proceeds to swat Patrick back. And around and around we go.

While last week we heard from Jesus on confrontation, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Which, at the time, I thought might have been one of Jesus' more difficult passages. This week we hear from Jesus on forgiveness as Peter asks, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" To which Jesus responds, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Going on to share what might be one of the WORST parables of all time, that of the Wicked Servant. And, while I thought confrontation was difficult, this might just take the cake. Especially considering the fact that our passage ends with Jesus more or less telling us that if we do not forgive the debts of our debtors then we will essentially be tortured until we repay our own.

And, while our parable may sound like a lesson on the golden rule, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It may read even more like, as Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, "Do unto others as you would have God do unto you, because if you do not forgive your brother from your heart your heavenly Father will have you hauled off to jail and throw away the key," and torture you for eternity. Which is a terrible lesson, that I cannot imagine was Jesus' intent, for the mere fact that it appears to be all about fear and devoid of love.

My favorite more recent interaction between my boys has been over a toy ambulance. Many of you may know that we have been working through the trials and tribulations of potty training. And, since the training has not been progressing as we had expected, or desired, or read in a book, we have resorted to the most successful parenting hack of all time, bribery. When one of the boys, Thomas in this case, had a successful execution on said pot, we awarded him with a new toy, in this case an ambulance. Which of course immediately became the most prized and coveted possession in our home. As Thomas played with his new prize, he did so in a way as to taunt and tease his brother, as he flashed the lights and played the siren, pushing the button over and over and over again while flashing a devilish smirk at Patrick, who stood there saying "my turn Thomas, my turn". Eventually leading Patrick to snap, and lung in to take what he felt was his fair turn. Thankfully Drew was there to intercept. That very next day though as Patrick cried and wailed for a reason indiscernible to anyone else, Thomas came in with the prized ambulance, giving it to his brother in an effort to console and comfort. As he said, "here you go Patrick, your ambulance."

The wicked servant may have been thrown in jail and tortured in the end, being punished for his own failure to forgive, but I believe there is even more to this story than we find on the surface. Because, I would argue, the wicked servant had already sentenced himself and begun his own punishment, before the King ever even knew about his actions against the slave who was indebted to him. For the simple fact that the wicked slave never understood, considered, or even accepted his own forgiveness in the first place. He

realized his debts were forgiven, yes, but all that meant to him was that now he owed nothing. Allowing him to continue on his way, completely unchanged. He didn't stop and consider what the forgiveness meant for the King who forgave the debt, or for him who was forgiven. Forgiven for what we can discern as a biggillion dollar debt. As the King writes it all off, lets it all go, to embrace the wicked slave simply as he was. Not seeing him as his debts, but as a person whom he desires to be in relationship with. Holding the sacredness of reconciliation over and above any debt, or trespass, or even sin.

As human beings we have the propensity to do cruel, unfair, and down right mean things to our fellow brothers and sisters. Things that often make us appear, for lack of a better word, bad, or as our parable suggests, even wicked. At the same time as human beings we have the ability to do kind, thoughtful, and amazingly loving things for one another, reminding us that we are essentially good. Forgiveness, I believe, might be one of the most crucial reminders and tools we have to remember and embrace our humanity, as the thing that connects us to one another. We will all mess up, and we should be held accountable. At the same time we all are deserving of forgiveness, forgiveness which allows for reconciliation.

Too often I think we forget what it truly means to forgive. We feel we have forgotten the wrongs others have committed, overlooked their bad behavior, or even dismissed it, but too often what we are really doing is just pushing those people out and blocking them from our view and our lives all together. Until there is nothing left between us, but unresolved anger and pain. As Rabbi Michael Lazzik argues, "Pain and anger" too often, "embed themselves in our souls." When we forget or fail to address the pain and hurt we have experienced and feel. "Gone unprocessed, unchecked and, ultimately, unreleased, this subterranean hurt can so easily metastasize, sapping us of potential and impeding us from feeling fully alive." Or, put more simply, as Anne Lamott says, "not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."

Watching my boys' interactions, their constant bickering, alongside their faithful companionship, it gives me hope, and reminds me what it means to forgive. As they forgive all the little slights they throw at each other day and night, because their bond as brothers is what connects them over and above anything else. I realize this is different then some of the wrongs we may have experienced as adults, at the same time, it is a reminder (for me at least) of how we begin to learn what it means to forgive. As the late Bishop Desmond Tutu suggests what it means to follow the Four Fold Path of Forgiveness, which is: 1.) Telling our story, "hey he hit me." 2.) Naming the pain, "and that hurt." 3.) Granting forgiveness, (in the case of Thomas and Patrick) with a hug or the offer of a toy, and renewing (or when necessary releasing) the relationship, in this case as the boys stay constant in their dedication to one another as companions (while sometimes forced) on the journey. We are all human, which means we all mess up, and yet we are all God's children, which means there is nothing that can separate us from God's forgiveness and love. I would argue that Jesus' parable is terrifying because we know how easily we can succumb to locking ourselves in the jail of pain and the torture of unchecked anger and rage. We deserve more, we deserve better, and we can have it. Where might you need to follow the Four Fold Path, telling your story, naming your pain, granting forgiveness, and renewing or releasing your relationships? As we say in our Lord's Prayer together as we celebrate Eucharist each week, and today, remember that in and as much as God forgives our trespasses, we are to forgive the trespasses of others. Not to let them off the hook, but to let ourselves, because we deserve that freedom from pain and hurt, and we deserve the joy of relational bonds and love.

Amen.