

# Restored to Wholeness

Following the lectionary is sometimes a challenge, because it leads us to wrestle with difficult topics like the one we have today: forgiveness. I see a pattern in the lectionary texts we were given, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, over the last couple of months: how to follow Christ in a world that does not reflect his teachings. Forgiveness, in the past decade, has fallen out of favour, even among the most vocal Christians. Today marks the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon; many churches will be praying for healing, some churches will be praying for the troops still stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq, but few churches, if any, would be asking God to help them forgive the terrorists who ended so many lives without mercy.

The problems we face with forgiveness today are the same as the early Christian church - Matthew was concerned with the life and identity of his faith community. He knew that following Christ is not a once-in-a-lifetime event, but an accumulation of everyday practices in every situation we are given. Every day, we have to deny ourselves because, according to the Gospel of Matthew, it is *we* who are a stumbling block to Jesus. We so easily set our minds not on divine things but on human things, just like Peter who was rebuked by Jesus, saying "Get behind me, Satan!" We, like Peter and like any other church, are not perfect, so we all have to be a learner first; we have to learn from Jesus, we have to learn from the examples of the disciples, and we have to learn from others outside our community, because Jesus did so; he let himself be challenged by the Canaanite woman, and learned from her. Only with continuous learning can we truly become followers of the Christ who says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." So when we face the tough topic of today, forgiveness, we are seeking a way to be perfect, a way into wholeness in Christ.

Today's passage begins with Peter's famous question about forgiveness and Jesus' equally famous response. Peter's suggestion that he must forgive up to seven times is not an attempt to place a limit on forgiveness. In fact, since seven is a holy number, Peter is probably asking something like, "Must I practice perfect forgiveness?" Jesus responds, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times or seventy times seven." While the exact number is not clear in the Greek, the point of the number is. Your forgiveness must be beyond perfect; it must be beyond

counting. Forgiveness becomes an absolute – not something to be rationalized away, or dismissed as an impossibility. Imagine your life if you lived with not just perfect forgiveness, but infinite forgiveness – if we could grant forgiveness for every injury, every insult, without one moment of grudging resentment – what would we be like? Imagine a world where we could all practice perfect forgiveness all the time!

In reality, however, forgiveness is always a complicated issue, because we hunger for justice as well. I've seen an excellent film which deals with forgiveness, grace and their meaning in an ordinary life. "Secret Sunshine" is a South Korean film, and got many awards including Best Actress at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. The main character, a widow, moves to her husband's small village of Miryan (the Korean word for secret sunshine) to raise her little boy. She runs a piano school and slowly rebuilds her life until her son is kidnapped by a man who invades their home one evening. Even though she pays the ransom, her son is brutally murdered and his body is dumped in a landfill near a polluted river. The grieving mother is despondent until she is converted by a local band of zealous Christians. She finds peace in their daily prayer meetings and decides to travel to the jail on a mission to forgive her son's murderer. However, she discovers that the convict is radiant and in perfect health. He announces before she forgives him that he has already been forgiven by God. She stumbles out of the jail and faints. Her rage intensifies; she becomes violent, suicidal and regrets ever offering forgiveness. She cries out, "How dare God absolve him before I've forgiven him myself?" She fights with God and resists the God who forgives, as she struggles with her own soul. It was harder for her to accept the God who forgives than to forgive.

The parable in today's reading does not address the grieving mother's question directly. Instead, it places human forgiveness in the context of divine forgiveness and divine punishment. The parable reads as a straightforward call for us to forgive one another because God forgives us and will punish us if we do not.

The story opens with the lord demanding repayment from a servant for an absurdly large amount of money. Ten thousand talents does not mean just ten thousand talents, since both "ten thousand" and "talent" serve in Greek as the largest possible number. Out of pity, the lord forgives the entire loan. This lord is excessive in mercy. The forgiven servant is in turn portrayed as excessive in severity. He violently chokes one of his fellow servants, demanding repayment for

a strikingly small amount of money. Then despite receiving the same plea he gave his lord, this servant throws his fellow servant into prison. All of this is told in such a way as to evoke the command for forgiveness in the Christian community. For instance, the language of “fellow servant” anticipates the dynamics of the Christian community, and the contrast in the amounts anticipates the contrast between what God forgives us and what we forgive each other. The excessive severity of this lord returns when the servant’s peers report him. The lord’s forgiveness, it turns out, is conditional. Forgiveness must engender forgiveness. The forgiven must forgive others. Given this absence of forgiveness, the lord rescinds his forgiveness and hands the servant over to be tortured. The passage, to the surprise of many of us, concludes, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” How can we understand this conditional forgiveness of God? (I think I keep throwing you more questions than answers today.)

If we consider the context of the Christian community in Matthew’s time, we can have a better understanding of today’s text. The Gospel of Matthew was written to give direction to the Christian community in a time of transition. Matthew was written after the Jerusalem temple was destroyed. And there was always pressure and risk in Matthew’s time, as described in Matthew 10:16-18, ‘See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.’ The followers of Jesus must learn how not to imitate the domineering practices of the Gentile rulers. Instead, Christians are to be an active and faithful alternative community of loving, merciful, inclusive, praying, missional servants, anticipating the completion of God’s purposes. This is only possible when they restore the wholeness of the life of their community. And forgiveness is a way into the wholeness: into wholeness through Christ’s example, because Jesus completed his mission on the cross by asking God’s forgiveness for his killers.

It’s the first thing to be forgotten when we witness terrible events, and the last thing to be emphasized when we struggle against evil - but forgiveness is such an essential part of our Christian lives, so restorative to our soul and the life of our church. And God’s forgiveness of our imperfection is always there, like a secret sunshine, invisible but warm, mending our broken hearts.