

Forgiving or Retaining

John 20:19-23

June 4, 2017

Do you find forgiveness difficult to give but easy to receive? If you and I are like most people, forgiving is a tall order. The very act feels like it requires so much of us, doesn't it? We may find ourselves wondering things like what are we supposed to do with all of our pain? Does forgiving feel like being asked to move on with life, like you are just supposed to forget? On that issue, it seems to me at least, the act of forgiveness is completely separate from forgetting, as I am not sure we can ever really forget much of anything. As some say, once you know you can't unknow.

Yet there is something quite powerful about forgiveness. It's why stories of forgiveness make such an incredible impact on us. I have found this to be especially so when the story is about those who have experienced unspeakable trauma finding the spiritual fortitude to forgive those who caused that trauma. Take the story of the Amish School shooting in Lancaster Pennsylvania in October of 2006. A man named Charlie Roberts walked into an Amish school and began shooting students, ultimately causing the death of 5 and then killing himself. The brutality of that event is unspeakable and it is something that will never be forgotten for those who experienced it. There is something else, though, that will never be forgotten by Charlie Roberts' mother Terri, the immediate forgiveness of the parents who lost their children that day.

All Terri wanted to do was move away from Lancaster and do it immediately. That all changed quickly when parents who lost their children showed up at Terri's house the very same night and sat with her and told her they wanted her to stay. Then, some of the victims' families came to Charlie's funeral. In an interview with CBS News, Terri said, "For the mother and father who had lost not just one but two daughters at the hand of our son, to come up and be the first ones to greet us -- wow. Is there anything in this life that we should not forgive?"¹

In an amazing sign of the ways in which forgiveness can bring new life, every Thursday since that tragic event, Terri cares for the most seriously wounded survivor of that shooting. A spokesperson for that Amish community sums it up best when he said "You have this mother who raised a son who did this horrific damage to this young woman and the mother has the courage and spiritual fortitude to come back and care for this young woman, and the parents of the young woman welcome her into their home. It's a powerful, powerful story."²

Now, this is only one example of the transformative power of forgiveness, and I am certain you could think of others. I am also certain that all of them are powerful, powerful stories of life only made possible by and through forgiveness. That seems to be what forgiveness does for us... give us NEW LIFE!

On the other hand, there are stories about those who could not forgive and as a result their life became bound by some past experience... a life that looked stuck in the past. Worse than a life

¹ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/mother-of-amish-school-shooter-shares-amazing-story-of-forgiveness/>

² <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/mother-of-amish-school-shooter-shares-amazing-story-of-forgiveness/>

stuck in the past though is a life overtaken and dominated by stress, and that is exactly what happens to those who don't forgive. Did you know that scientists have shown that the inability to forgive causes our bodies to release all of the chemicals associated with the response to stress? In other words, when we don't forgive, when we retain the harmful things done, we live in a constant state of stress, and I have never met anyone who would intentionally choose to live that way... but even knowing this doesn't make forgiving any easier I suspect.

I have to believe the disciples were full of stress when Jesus came to them behind those locked doors. Don't you?

Do you wonder now if this is what Jesus saw when he appeared before his disciples? People so fearful, people so full of stress about what others had done to someone they loved, that he knew their inability to forgive would haunt them the rest of their days. Maybe the entire concept was foreign to them, after all they had mostly lived oppressed lives and were mostly subject to the rule of someone else who never really appeared to care about their wellbeing. Surely the very concept of forgiveness in those circumstances was unknown.

Now here they were... a fearful group, most likely a stressed out group, meeting together, behind locked doors for reasons we can only speculate about because the text doesn't actually tell us, when Jesus appears greeting them is a most interesting way. At first he says, Peace be with you, then as though knowing what was needed he shows his wounds then says again Peace be with you again. Powerful imagery, isn't it?

The imagery doesn't stop there though because with his next sentence, Jesus breathes on them and calls on them to "RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT!"

Recently we have been talking a good bit about the Holy Spirit. We've been asking hard questions like:

What does it mean to be led by the Holy Spirit? and

What are people really saying when they claim to be led by the Holy Spirit? We have been searching for concrete examples instead of typical Sunday School programed type answers.

No doubt these are difficult questions, but they are real, and their difficulty should never cause us to turn away from them. In fact, their difficulty should be seen as an invitation to further exploration. Facing the difficult questions head-on is in fact the only doorway leading to better understanding. Facing difficulties head-on is how we get out of our huddled, fearful, stressed out state behind those locked doors, and discover our new life God intended all along.

In freely displaying his wounds, or better yet, in greeting his disciples by displaying his wounds, Jesus lets everyone know he has faced life's difficulties head-on and we should too. He is letting them know he cannot be held back by his wounds and while his wounds are part of his life's story, they aren't the whole story. By freely showing his wounds he is transforming them into his glory because maybe Jesus knows that facing the difficulties of life head-on leads to new resurrected life. This new resurrected life also required forgiveness of others and even though

throughout his life he modeled the importance of forgiving others, maybe he knew help was still needed.

Surely, it seems, he knew the disciples felt this way, and as always, he finds them, right where they are, and brings peace. This time, though, he brought something else, he brought his breath and in so doing brought the Holy Spirit.

Maybe he knew this task of forgiveness felt too big to do alone.

Maybe this gift of breath, this gift of the Holy Spirit was to be seen as another aspect of the communal nature of life.

Maybe it was all of these things and more, but no matter what, Jesus knew his disciples, and that includes us, need to receive the Holy Spirit in order to forgive. Maybe he knew his disciples, and that includes us, need the Holy Spirit so that we don't retain the hurt.

Maybe he knew his disciples, and that includes us, need the Holy Spirit to empower us to face the difficulties of life so that we may truly live.

Maybe Jesus knew the Holy Spirit was the way to New Life for all followers of The Way!

No matter what, Jesus seemed to know that we always need the help of others. This gift of breath, this gift of the Holy Spirit is a gift of togetherness. It is the fulfillment of God's promise to always be with you.

I found this an interesting choice for today's Lectionary Gospel lesson, after all today is Pentacost. Truth be told, maybe it would have been easier if I had just chosen this week's reading from Acts because Acts chapter 2:1-21 is the detailed account of the day of Pentacost. That day, 50 days after Easter when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Followers of The Way. In fact, at my Tuesday meeting last week, I was the only preacher using John's Gospel as the scripture for their sermon.

For me though, John's telling of Jesus appearing to those scared, stressed out Disciples, huddled behind locked doors, and breathing the gift of the Holy Spirit for them, is of equal importance. Could it be that Jesus appearing and breathing this gift of the Holy Spirit was exactly what the Disciples needed to give them the strength to get Pentacost? Needing the help of others is universal. Acknowledging this need actually helps connect us to those who have come before, like the Disciples.

Sometimes we need the help of others to reboot our lives so that we can take that first step toward the next destination on the journey of life. This is most certainly the case when we are asked to forgive. It feels like such a monumental task that I suspect Jesus knew we couldn't do it alone and that is at least one reason he talked about forgiving or retaining immediately after breathing on them. That fearful stressed out group behind locked doors needed someone, or at least something, to help them come out and begin life again. But to truly begin anew they would need the power to forgive others so Jesus Breathed on them and said RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT! And the fact that we are here today, talking about all of this, claiming and re-claiming when necessary this Faith, is amazing evidence of the Disciples reception of the holy Spirit and the new life that resulted.

That new life was only possible through this gift of the Holy Spirit and the resulting power to forgive.

If left to our own devices, we might retain all of the wrongs of others and our lives may just become stuck.

If left to our own devices we might think that running away from the pain caused by others is our best option.

That is certainly what Terri Roberts said she was going to do because of the horrendous acts of her son, and who knows what would have happened to her and her life if she actually acted on that impulse. Luckily though for her and for all who have heard her story, being forgiven by the parents of those victims, who by the way were victims themselves, and being asked to continue living in community with them transformed everything.

Forgiveness became the launching pad for a new life dedicated to helping. True and thorough forgiveness, the kind that comes with the Holy Spirit, is the reason this mother has the courage and spiritual fortitude to come back and care for a young woman who was permanently harmed by the son she raised. True and thorough forgiveness, the kind that comes with the Holy Spirit is the reason you have the parents of the young woman welcoming Terri Roberts into their home.

Lives transformed... Lives made anew... All made possible because forgiveness paved the way for a hopeful future.

Maybe there is someone, or something you need to forgive and if that is the case then my prayer is that you do it. That you trust in the power of this gift of the Holy Spirit for it has been breathed into you too. New life is possible as long as we start forgiving and stop retaining.

AMEN!