

Finding Wholeness in Forgiving

A homily preached by Jennifer A. Hudson at St. Paul's on the Green Episcopal Church, October 26, 2017.

Genesis 45: 4-15 and Matthew 18:21-35

In the name of the God who creates, redeems, and sustains us. Amen.

Has someone ever given up on you? I can remember my most painful instance of this. She was my best friend through high school and college, a true *anam cara*, someone with whom I shared a great deal, including unconditional love and support. We had our first misunderstanding. It was to become our last. There were no hostile words exchanged. In fact, not much was really being said. Yet the tension was palpable. I knew something was wrong when I failed to hear from her after several attempts at contact. In fact, it took a while before I realized I was never going to hear from her again. The loss broke my heart.

My friend hadn't expressed what was bothering her. Instead of talking, her resolution was to give up on me and give me a perpetual cold shoulder. That hurt. What's more, I ended up berating myself for what were only guesses as to what I might have done or said to offend her. With the source of the conflict unspoken, and without any reconciliation or closure, my pain only deepened.

Tonight's Gospel reminds us about the importance of forgiveness—of clearing the air with others and letting the pain of their offenses go. Jesus tells us that we must forgive often, beyond merely once or several times. He also reminds us in his parable about the slave to forgive the debts of others the way God forgives our own.

God wishes for all things, for all of us, to be whole, reconciled, restored. Forgiveness allows us to repair breaches and restore losses. Yet it's hard for us humans to extend the compassion that

leads to forgiveness to those who have wronged us, to ourselves, to the Harvey Weinsteins and Stephen Paddocks.

Yet I think to the story of Joseph who, despite having been sold into slavery by his brothers, bears no hard feelings toward them. He does what the slave in Jesus' parable cannot: make peace with and make a positive out of a bad situation.

That's easier said than done. And I'm not suggesting that when someone inflicts deep pain on us that it's easily shrugged or that restitution can always be made. But I think what Jesus is getting at in this parable is that we will never know an ounce of peace in the aftermath of injury unless we try to see our debtors through the eyes of compassion and mercy, unless we try to understand what lead them to do what they've done or left undone, unless we choose to let go and start the healing process.

My former friend may not have offered me any chance at reconciliation or closure, but I did give it to myself when I forgave her in my heart. Forgiveness is liberating. In letting go of wounds and starting anew, we enter into a resurrection story that intersects Jesus' own. We find wholeness. We learn to love as God does. And we learn that, even if others do, God never gives up on us.