

March 26, 2017
Fourth Sunday in Lent

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Reprieve”

The Reverend Melanie Marsh Baum



*The quality of mercy is not strain'd, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
upon the place beneath: it is twice blest; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.*

~ William Shakespeare

The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

Psalm 103:8–13

⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

¹⁰He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

¹²as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

¹³As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

Matthew 18:21–35

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

"Reprieve"

Psalm 103:8–13, Matthew 18:21–35

Her son's killer stood on a chair on the gallows, his hands shackled, the noose around his neck. Hundreds crowded outside the jailhouse in the northern Iranian town to see if the mother, Samereh Alinejad, would exercise her right to kick the chair out from under him to let him hang. You see, in Iran, and many other Arab nations, victim's families, and not the government, are often given the final choice over whether convicted killers live or die. They have the chance to oversee the killer's execution. Retribution had been Samereh's only thought ever since her 17-year-old son Abdollah was killed. Seven years earlier, the young man on the gallows, Bilal Gheisari, pulled a knife in the midst of a chaotic street brawl, and sliced through Abdollah's neck. These two families had a complicated history. The two boys, victim and perpetrator had grown up together, had trained at the same soccer school, where the victim's father had coached them both. Only two years before **Abdollah's** death, the family had lost their **oldest** son, Amir. He was hit by a motorcycle as he was riding his bicycle near their home. One of the two boys on the motorcycle that killed Amir was Bilal Gheisari, the young man who stood before them now, begging this mother to spare his life. Seven years of dreaming of revenge, and now she held the killer's life in her hands. "My world collapsed the day I heard about my son's death", Samereh recalled, "If I pardoned Bilal and saved him from death, how would I be able to live anymore?"

Samereh Alinejad could not imagine a world where her sons were gone forever, and yet this killer remained alive. She did not see how she could go on living knowing that she had granted his reprieve. Grief, anger, and bitterness consumed her. When we are suffering, it can sometimes feel like these emotions are the only things holding us together. It is utterly human, the urge toward retribution. It is something we all understand. It makes a kind of sense to us: "You hurt me. I want to hurt you back". And yet, we hear Christ telling us, again and again, "Forgive". It is an idea so central to our faith journey, that it often becomes trite and cliché: "Turn the other cheek", "Do not return evil for evil", "Love your enemies". If only it were as easy to actually do these things as it is to say the words. But we have learned as we've moved through the Lord's Prayer during Lent, that each phrase of this prayer is far more complicated and ambiguous than we might have thought. Of course forgiveness is too.

We live as we pray. Christ knew what he was asking of his disciples when he taught them to pray, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” He wanted them to understand that the forgiveness they sought for their sins meant little if they were not willing, in turn, to give it away.

The theologian Miroslav Volf says that there are three ways to understand this link in the Lord’s Prayer between our forgiveness and God’s, but that only one of them is right. The first and most obvious is that God will forgive us because we forgive others. But that would mean that God’s forgiveness is *not* a freely given gift of grace, rather a payment in return for our right actions. The other way to look at it, which the parable of the debtor supports, is that God’s forgiveness is a free gift, but if we fail to forgive others, then God will take that forgiveness away. Indeed, this is exactly what the king in the parable does. When he hears about the servant’s behavior toward his debtor, the king throws the servant into prison until he repays all of his debt; in other words, for the rest of his life. This story makes it pretty straightforward: We can’t earn God’s forgiveness, but we can un-earn it.

Volf says that if we read the parable this way, we have taken it too literally. These stories aren’t meant to illustrate exactly who God is or precisely how God’s kingdom works. Instead, this story simply shows us that God’s forgiveness and our forgiveness go hand in hand.

Christ also knew what he was asking of his disciples when he taught them, “Do not forgive seven times, but seventy-seven.” A young man once prayed saying, “God, give me patience! Just please give me patience!” and God answered the young man, “I’m not going to give you patience. What I will give you is plenty of opportunities to *practice* patience.” Forgiveness is a practice. It is a practice that is as much for us, as it is for those that we forgive. Jesus urged Peter and all of his followers to forgive – over and over and over again – as many times as it took for their hearts to be at peace. The unforgiving slave, thrown into the pit, tortured until his debt was repaid, it is a picture of each one of us when we harbor resentment in our hearts. This is why we must forgive, as we pray God will forgive us: over and over, day in and day out, for the big things and the small. To do that, we must practice.

Several years ago, in the Amish community of Nickel Mines a man entered a one-room Amish schoolhouse and killed five young girls and wounded five others before killing himself. Within hours friends and family members of the victims reached out to the family of the shooter and extended forgiveness.

One Amish historian believes that the Amish community of Nickel Mines was able to extend forgiveness so quickly and genuinely because forgiveness is deeply rooted in their culture. Forgiveness is something the Amish practice daily. It isn't an occasion you buy a card for; it is something you do every day. Parents practice it in front of their children, neighbors practice it with one another, and siblings learn that they must practice it too. The Amish practice forgiveness daily, not because they transgress against each other more than the rest of us, but because it is how they live out their faith. Every day, they forgive the small things, and it is precisely this practice of forgiving everyday offenses that allowed them to extend forgiveness to one who had done something unforgivable.

Bishop Desmond Tutu has also thought a lot about practice of forgiving the unforgivable. As one of the architects of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in his home country of South Africa, Bishop Tutu spent years working with people on both sides, who had suffered violence and trauma during Apartheid. He realized through this journey that although what many victims of violence and injustice *want* is retribution against those who have caused them to suffer, what they actually *need* is to find some way to forgive.

He writes, "Retaliation gives, at best, only momentary respite from our emotional pain. Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility of being at peace."

Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound with chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness; that person will be our jailor.

When we forgive, we take back control of our own fate and our feelings. We become our own liberators. Forgiveness, in other words, is the best form of self-interest. This is true both spiritually and biologically. We don't forgive to help the other person. We forgive for ourselves.

Samareh Alinejad walked slowly toward the gallows, with Gheisari's family among the crowd of onlookers. A blindfolded Gheisari, weeping, begged her one last time. "Forgive me" he pleaded, "Show mercy." Alinejad moved in close, face to face, with Gheisari. "Did you have mercy on us? Did you show mercy to my son?" she demanded. "You have taken happiness away from us. Why should I have mercy toward you?" Alinejad stared angrily at him. Then she slapped him across the face, and She and her husband slipped the noose off his neck. With that movement, Semareh Alinejad spared the life of the young man who had been complicit in the deaths of two of her children. Some in the crowd applauded. Others stood silently shocked. But Semareh felt only relief. "I felt as if all the blood that had accumulated in my heart over the years suddenly burst open and poured out. I became peaceful. I do not think about revenge anymore."

Amen.