

Settling Accounts

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

My friend Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martin in the Fields, London, told this story at the General Assembly in 2017. As a young clergyman he had gone to visit an elderly lady in his parish. She'd grown up in Wales. She'd left the church when she was a young woman, but it wasn't the usual story of a young person growing up and away from faith. Now that she was 90 she thought it was time to give the church a second chance.

Sam asked her what it was that had led her to being away from the church for 75 years. Her response was breath-taking.

"It was when we wanted to get married. We were in love. The rector wouldn't marry us", she replied. Sam asked some more. "So, was there something wrong? Was your fiancé previously married, or were you too young, maybe?"

She responded calmly. "No. The rector looked at my hand. You see, I worked in a mill. I had an accident when I was 16." She held up her left hand. The last three fingers were missing. "The rector said that, since I didn't have a finger to put the wedding ring on, he wouldn't marry us." After that shocker, 75 years away from the church seemed pretty lenient.

Recovering himself, Sam asked, "And dare I ask what brings you back to the church now?" The woman replied, "God's bigger than the Church. I'll be dead soon. The Lord's Prayer says forgive if you want to be forgiven. So in the end that's what I've decided to do."ⁱ

Desmond Tutu, speaking about South Africa's long and still not completed journey towards forgiveness, wisely writes: "True forgiveness deals with the past, all of the past, to make the future possible. We cannot go on nursing grudges even vicariously for those who cannot speak for

themselves any longer.”ⁱⁱ I like that. ‘True forgiveness deals with the past...to make the future possible.’

Forgiveness. How do we forgive? We need forgiveness in our lives, whether we need to forgive or to be forgiven. In both the Joseph story from Genesis, where the brothers were fearful of what wronged Joseph might do now that the restraining influence of patriarch Jacob was gone; and also the Jesus parable in Matthew’s Gospel where forgiveness, and mercy, play a challenging part, bring us to recognize that in our own lives we will have been forgiven much over the years and will have forgiven many too. To be a Christian woman or man today has to do with coming to terms with forgiveness and being forgiven. Forgiveness flies in the face of the US politician Bobby Kennedy’s quote, ‘Don’t get mad, get even.’

In the Christian life, there is no room for held grudges, nursed over days, years. Do you have any of those? Those stories that you’ve rehearsed and rehearsed over and over again so that you are word-perfect. “Then she said...then he did...And I will never forgive.” Even though we know we need to let go of it, even although to live in an unforgiven state perpetuates the hurt and the hold that the incident or person has over us. Or that we, if we are the ones who have done wrong, have over them if we don’t enter into that fragile, painful, slow-footed dance that is the act of forgiveness.

It is Peter speaking to Jesus who presses the point of forgiveness and leads to that odd parable. Just how many times are we supposed to forgive someone who has wronged and hurt us? Seven times? Jesus says not seven but seventy times seven. And that’s not to say 490 times for those counting on literalism. Jesus’ point is hyperbolic. He means we are called to forgive many times without number. For Jesus, and the people who follow Him, and for His Church, forgiveness is not a limited or isolated act, but an ongoing activity among members of the faith community. It’s not

simply a personal thing, though that's important; it can also be a whole church, whole community, whole nation thing.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the parable Jesus teaches about forgiveness, the sin is named, the repentance of the sinner is required, and the application of forgiveness on the part of the sinner towards others is expected. It's an extreme story told by Jesus to startle Peter into realising how absurd his question about forgiveness is. We're meant to forgive all of the time. "It is the way we mend tears in the social fabric. It is the way we stop our human community from unravelling."^{iv}

Forgiveness means to release, to let go of the other. Forgiveness is not denying the hurt in some sentimental and unrealistic fashion. We've no business glossing over our hurt or pretending it didn't really matter. Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the bad impact of actions on the lives of others, or our own lives. Forgiving is not necessarily forgetting, and that's where we get into murky waters. Can we really forgive if we refuse to forget? Can we relinquish the hurt, trivial or deep, if every time we see the person, or remember the situation, we replay the whole thing?

A few years ago a colleague was Moderator of the Presbytery. I remember her closing prayer would often include the words, "Lord, we pray for the people we love, and the people we find hard to love." When we find forgiveness hard, because the forgetting is difficult, perhaps we might pray, "Lord, we pray for the people we have forgiven, and the people who have forgiven us; and the people we find hard to forgive, and the people who find it hard to forgive us." Is it a cop out to bring God into the situation? When we can't cope, when we can't do it, there's no shame in calling on God. I can tell you this, it has certainly helped me in situations I've experienced when I have found it hard to forgive, and harder to forget. And it's a healthy and humbling thing to pray for those people who find it hard to forgive me or forget what I have done. Might I suggest that if that's true for me, it may possibly be true for you.

"...in the bruising business of life, the reality we all know is that we wound and we are wounded. We get hurt and we hurt other people, and both affect us profoundly. The hurts we receive can and do mark us deeply; we get angry, resentful, discouraged, bitter, defeated...We have to deal with them for ourselves...The hurts we know we have inflicted – these too cause their own...pain which can linger long."

Richard Holloway has said something helpful about this. "We forgive people, not sins. We forgive and accept people, in spite of their acts against us." In forgiving people, we are not condoning actions, we are accepting people, in spite of. Jesus tells us that when we understand that we can do it again and again and again. Grace grows. And, far from being something supine, as the action of the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son shows, forgiveness is about taking the initiative in a relationship, or recognising that the relationship has come to an end and we put it, and the person, into God's hands because we are not able to do more. But we refuse to be bound by what happened, or weighed down by the hurt, but walk away from it, even if we limp because of the bruising encounter.

But there are times when forgiveness, when we are strong, and empowered by our faith, breaks the iron bands of revenge and recrimination, and delivers us from bitterness and resentment, and frees us from guilt and fear. Forgiveness is a great grace, and the more we practise it, the more we are able to offer it, and, let it not be forgotten, the more we are able to accept it. Because sometimes the hardest thing for us is to accept forgiveness for what we have done. And then move on.^v

Forgiveness flows from the cross of Jesus Christ. It is there that we learn that we are accepted, in spite of everything, that we are forgiven, in spite of all our irresponsible and petty actions. As we have been forgiven, so we might work to forgive others. How do we witness to this part of our Easter faith? In things big and small, we keep remembering, 'Seventy times seven'. "Forgive us our

debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Don’t say it and not try to mean it. Don’t say it and not realise that it’s something we have to keep trying to do and to be. Forgive others, and where you are in the wrong and repented, and meant it, accept forgiveness for yourself. And be set free!

A woman in her 90s sat down with her priest, with three fingers missing from her hand, and a bitter memory of a clergyman who got it wrong decades before.

“God’s bigger than the Church. I’ll be dead soon. The Lord’s Prayer says forgive if you want to be forgiven. So, in the end that’s what I’ve decided to do.”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Sam Wells, Face to Face, pps27-28

ⁱⁱ Desmond Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness, p226

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Campbell, Feasting on the Word Year A Vol 4, p69

^{iv} Desmond & Mpho Tutu, The Book of Forgiving, p4

^v Leith Fisher, But I Say to You, pps231, 232