

## **Let it Go...Yeah, Right**

**Matthew 18:15-35**

**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**

**March 10, 2019**

**Northminster Presbyterian Church**

Cornelia stared at the little man...and her heart froze.

She looked him in the eye...and on one level she could see the timid, elderly man who approached her, thanking her for her speech about forgiveness. It was 1947. She had been invited on a reconciliation tour of Germany. As a former prisoner of war...part of a Christian family who had created a safe space in their home for Jews on the run from Hitler's thugs and a nation that followed him into the depths of inhumanity....people had been particularly grateful that she had been willing to come from her home in the Netherlands to speak words of forgiveness. And the man who stood before her now had heard her words...had taken them to heart and came forward to thank her and to personally ask for her forgiveness. He had been a guard in the Treblinka Concentration Camp...where Cornelia had been a prisoner for most of 1944..where she had watched her sister die of malnutrition and the many diseases that flew through the camp like the bitter winter winds. And now, inspired by her own words, he dared to approach her...to talk about his religious conversion and his shame at what he had been a part of...and again...begging her to forgive him.

It was heart wrenching...but as she wrote in her journal..."I could not forgive him. May God forgive me.....But I could shake his hand."

Cornelia's family had been key figures in the Haarlem Netherlands underground. Even after her arrest...none of the people hiding in her family home were ever caught. But 5 members of her family were imprisoned...and two died while in the camps.

In 1947, staring into the penitent eyes of one of her tormentors....Cornelia could not muster the strength to forgive him...not yet...but she knew that God could...that God had not abandoned this man to his wrongs of the past....and so with her heart still clinging to her own pain,

still she reached out and took his hand, essentially welcoming him back into the family of humanity, not on her own behalf, but God's.

Cornelia is better known by the shortened form of her name that her father preferred...Corrie. Corrie Ten Boom wrote a lot about her experiences during the war...The Hiding Place is still a landmark work of that time. And most of her work centered on grace and forgiveness.

Today we encounter what some have called the hinge of Matthew's gospel. This passage marks the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and the turn toward Jerusalem. It also marks the beginning of our Lenten journey with Jesus and the parables of Matthew.

Each week from now until Palm Sunday, we'll hear one of Jesus' tall tales...part of his last series of lessons for the disciples and for us as he prepared to face the challenges of Holy Week.

It's interesting that Jesus pairs a parable about forgiveness with a lesson about what to do when someone "sins against you"...or essentially hurts you through wrongful action or words. It's a tribute to Jesus' understanding of humanity that we don't just get pie in the sky Jesus standing on a hillside singing the First Century version of that song that has been ubiquitous for the last half decade...."Let it Go" from Frozen. No, Jesus doesn't give pat answers; he knows it's hard.

"Let it go"...A phrase I've heard so many times growing up in the south. It was used by members of my own extended family to suggest that Blacks needed to get over slavery and move on...that than any number of victims of violence or oppression in the past needed to get over it....

In these last 5 years that Frozen has returned that catch-phrase to our public consciousness, I've marveled at its arrogant simplicity... But then I listened to the words of the song...

Let it go, let it go  
Turn away and slam the door!

....

It's time to see what I can do  
To test the limits and break through

No right, no wrong, no rules for me, I'm free!

Let It Go ISN'T about empowerment...it's about running away from your problems without solving them...And then we remember it's the song sung by the person who at that point in the movie is confused, scared and terrified by what she has done...and so she runs away....

She flees relationship....the only way to let it go...is to run away.

And, as we later see...that doesn't work...her life becomes more frozen, more frightening...

But...if it's not about letting go...then what is this forgiveness thing all about...how do we do what Jesus instructs...going to someone who has done us wrong and trying to get them to change their behavior....and then also forgiving them seventy-seven times?

One thing is for sure...by putting the parable and the instruction close together in his teachings, Jesus is acknowledging that this forgiveness thing is difficult...

Because it means confronting wrong...but not in an aggressive way...not in a demanding way...not in a way that humiliates the other person...not even in public unless that is the only way to get them to stop their hurtful actions...Confronting wrong not to get an apology...but to get the person to hear you...and hopefully to stop....

And did you notice...Jesus says if they don't change their ways....treat them like a Gentile or a tax-collector...But then Jesus' ministry was all about reaching out to the Gentiles and the tax-collectors and others who were hated and marginalized, wasn't it? If the person who is hurting you won't stop...Jesus isn't saying write that person off...just don't consider them part of your inner circle...don't keep subjecting yourself to their abuse...but rather see them as someone in need of gospel-tinted hospitality and hope.

If that's not confusing enough, then we get the parable...a parable that is a bit like a Saturday Night Live Skit Galilee style...at least if you understand the hyperbole written into the story...hear it again perhaps as those who would have first heard it...would have experienced it.

A man owed his boss a billion dollars and the boss wanted him to pay it back or he would throw him into debtor's prison. The man pleaded with his boss "Sure, the amount I owe you is roughly 150,000 years of my salary...but if you will spare me, I will do all I can to pay back every single penny." The boss always has a soft heart for a good sob story and he says...okay...I'm going to forgive the debt...go home, go free...

As he's leaving the debtor's prison, the man bumps into a neighbor who borrowed \$5 from him for lunch the week before. "Give me my money, you loser" the man says....And when his neighbor can't....he throws HIM in debtor's prison.

The boss finds out and says..."whoa, if you're going to be a jerk about this kind of thing to other people...remember that billion dollars? not only do you still owe it...but I'm basically going to torture you every day until you pay it."

Jesus likes to use hyperbole in his parables...it gets our attention. The man can never, ever pay the debt...and it is forgiven...but he refuses to forgive a much smaller debt...

Pretty subtle huh?

Maybe Jesus is being literal...if you don't forgive others, I won't forgive you...but that's not normally how parables work...usually they are more about asking questions than giving answers...

What if Jesus is suggesting something we really know if we're honest....when we don't forgive, we imprison ourselves...What is it they say about

resentment...it's like drinking poison every day and waiting for the other person to die...

And when we just "let it go"...not confronting another's evil or wrong, we don't do anything to renew or rebuild relationships either...because we deprive both us and them of the transforming wonders of Grace.

We are called to forgive....again and again...because forgiveness is restoration of relationship....but we are NOT called to keep putting up with someone's actions that continue to harm us. We can both confront our wrongdoers and forgive....

Joseph (the one with the coat of many colors) did it in Egypt with his brothers....

Jesus did it with virtually everyone....

We are invited to do it too...especially in the church.

Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities, writes a lot about conflict and forgiveness in communities:

"Community is the place of forgiveness. In spite of all the trust we may have in each other, there are always words that wound, self-promoting attitudes, situations where susceptibilities clash. That is why living together implies a cross, a constant effort, an acceptance which is daily, and mutual forgiveness.... If we come into community without knowing that the reason we come is to learn to forgive and be forgiven seven times seventy-seven times, we will soon be disappointed."<sup>1</sup>

So whom have you not forgiven? Who have I not been honest with about how they have hurt me? Who needs to know that their actions are causing you harm? It's not a comfortable thing...but it is a necessary one...

---

<sup>1</sup> Vanier, Jean. Community and Growth, Revised Edition. Paulist Press, 1989, p. 37.

It can be big things....like a leader supporting a policy that you believe is destroying the earth...

It can be small things...words spoken or typed in haste that wounded, perhaps unintentionally...

Our response should be the same....honesty...determining if the person is willing to continue to be in community with you...and if not...finding a way to see them as one still in need of grace and love and hospitality without continuing to let them hurt you...

Corrie Ten Boom wrote that she was ultimately able to forgive that former prison guard, even though she was terribly mistreated and her sister died as a result of the evil system he was a part of....but if she had never reached out...even when she couldn't yet forgive...remembering that he needed grace even if it didn't come from her...she might never have come to that place of forgiveness...

Beth Buckingham Brown, pastor at Lincoln Park Presbyterian suggests that sometimes that's where it starts...by saying inside your own heart...I can't forgive you forever yet...but since God can...I will free you from the sentence of my judgment...for today...with no promises about tomorrow...

After the war, Corrie didn't just write books...She opened centers in Holland...rehabilitation centers for those who had been in the concentration camps...and she said she discovered something there...something that Jesus seems to allude to here...

Those who were able to work their way...as hard as it was, towards forgiveness with their German neighbors, were able to rebuild their lives...those who could not...became slaves to the past.

Jesus' hope for each of us is freedom...freedom from the wrongs we have done and from the wrongs that others have done and are doing to us...but

also freedom from the internal tyranny of resentment...and that freedom isn't about running off alone to "let it go"...but staying in community...quenching the fires of resentment with honesty and grace...

One final word from Corrie Ten Boom...

She says..."I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on Christ's. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives along with the command, the love itself....Love is the strongest force in the world, and when it is blocked that means pain. There are two things we can do when this happens. We can kill that love so that it stops hurting. But then of course part of us dies, too. Or we can ask God to open up another route for that love to travel." That route is forgiveness and renewal.

Not letting go....but definitely...letting God.. Amen.