

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Matthew 18:15-20

Radical Forgiveness*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Before I begin, I'd like to ask us to take a moment to remember all those in the Caribbean islands and in Florida who have been (or will be) affected by Hurricane Irma, as well as those in Mexico who were impacted by last week's earthquake. Assist them mercifully, O Lord, that they may ever be defended by thy gracious and ready help, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

About the only thing that I see on the news nowadays is conflict. There's global conflict with the escalating tensions over North Korea. There's national conflict with the post-Charlestown debates over race and racism. And there's local conflict with last week's massive protests in Manhattan over the termination of the DACA program for Dreamers.

As followers of the Jesus movement, we are called to model reconciliation for the world, even when there is conflict all around us. But the reality is that reconciliation is much easier said than done.

A few years ago, the *New York Times Magazine* published a remarkable series of photographs called "Portraits of Reconciliation." Each photo featured a pair of individuals from the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Over the course of just a hundred days in that year, nearly a million ethnic Tutsis were slaughtered by the Hutu governing majority.

Each photo in the New York Times series paired a Hutu offender, who had committed horrific crimes, along with a Tutsi survivor, who was a victim of such crimes. The offender had asked for forgiveness from the victim. And, amazingly, the victim had granted the offender's request.

One portrait featured Francois and Epiphanie. Francois was a young Hutu man who had murdered the son of Epiphanie, an older Tutsi woman. The two of them were sitting next to each other, side-by-side, on a single straw mat in front of a dried-mud wall, and each gazing into the camera.

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Francois told the *Times*, “Because of the genocide perpetrated in 1994, I participated in the killing of the son of this woman. We are now members of the same group of unity and reconciliation.”

Epiphanie responded, “He killed my child, then he came to ask me pardon. I immediately granted it to him because he did not do it by himself – he was haunted by the devil. I was pleased by the way he testified to the crime instead of keeping it in hiding, because it hurts if someone keeps hiding a crime he committed against you.”

How was it ever possible for Epiphanie and Francois to get to this point of reconciliation? The answer, I believe, lies in today’s gospel passage. The answer is restorative justice.

In a system of restorative justice, the focus is not so much on the guilt of the offender (as is the case with our own criminal justice system). Rather, the focus is on meeting the victim’s needs for healing and closure, as well as the needs of the broader community. Some of those needs might include information sharing, truth-telling, empowerment, and vindication.

In the case of Rwanda, the local communities set up a system of community tribunals. Through these tribunals, the offenders came to learn first-hand how their actions had harmed the victims and the broader community – often through painful face-to-face conversations. Only after the offenders took responsibility for their actions could they be reintegrated into society.

As I alluded to earlier, today’s gospel reading from Matthew is also about restorative justice. Jesus teaches us a four-step method for addressing conflicts in the church. (Yes, there is conflict even in the church. Imagine that!)

First, if another church member sins against you, Jesus says to “go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” Instead of complaining about the other person behind his or her back and dividing the church community, approach the person directly. Rather than triangulation or spreading gossip, this first step allows the victim to tell the offender directly about his or her pain.

Second, if the offender doesn’t listen, then Jesus says that the victim should “take [along] one or two others.” In other words, instead of shutting down the conversation, the victim is asked to bring in other individuals from the community to serve as witnesses and to help the parties with resolving the conflict.

Third, if all that doesn’t work, then Jesus says to “tell it to the church.” Instead of keeping a serious matter secret and letting it fester, the broader community should be informed at some point. A core principle of restorative justice is that an ongoing dispute between two individuals will inevitably tear the fabric of the broader community. As such, the broader community needs to be informed so that it can eventually repair the damage caused by the feuding parties.

Fourth, and finally, if none of the above works, then Jesus says “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” What does it mean to treat someone like a Gentile and a tax collector? What is Jesus telling us to do? Some church communities have interpreted this as a directive to shun – or to kick out – the unrepentant offender. That is, once the community has done all that it can do, it’s time to sever the relationship.

I interpret this final instruction differently, however. How *did* Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? Well, much of Jesus’ ministry was actually about welcoming Gentiles, and not rejecting them. Furthermore, Jesus was often eating and hanging out with tax collectors and sinners. In fact, Matthew – the author of today’s gospel reading – was himself a tax collector!

So if we’ve gone through all the steps of restorative justice – speaking with the offender, problem-solving with the help of others, and eventually notifying the broader community – and the offender still refuses to listen, what do we do? I believe that we have no choice but to love the offender anyway. Love the person just as Jesus loved Gentiles and tax collectors. Forgive him or her, just as God forgives each of us.

This teaching about radical forgiveness is difficult to hear and even more difficult to put into practice. A few years ago, South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter wrote a wonderful book called *The Book of Forgiving*.¹ I commend the book to all of you. In that book, Tutu writes about what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness, Tutu says, is not weakness. Forgiveness is not a subversion of justice. Forgiveness is not forgetting. And forgiveness is not quick, nor is it easy.

Forgiveness *is*, however, the way of Jesus. It *is* the way of the cross. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” What if we thought about sin, not so much in terms of God’s retribution or punishment (like earthquakes or hurricanes), but rather in terms of God’s call for restorative justice? What if God’s ultimate concern was less about adjudicating a sinner’s guilt, and more about meeting the needs of the victim and community for healing and closure? What would such a community of faith look like?

I’d like to close with an excerpt from a powerful poem from Archbishop Tutu’s book. This poem helped to give me a little bit of insight into the remarkable story of Epiphanie and Francois from Rwanda. Tutu writes:

*I will forgive you
The words are so small
But there is a universe hidden in them
When I forgive you
All those cords of resentment pain and sadness that had wrapped
themselves around my heart will be gone*

¹ Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

*When I forgive you
You will no longer define me*

....

*I will forgive you
My forgiveness is not a gift that I am giving to you
When I forgive you
My forgiveness will be a gift that gives itself to me*

May we, as followers of the Jesus movement, come to know the grace of restorative justice and reconciliation. And may we come to know radical forgiveness ourselves – both in terms of giving and receiving.