All Saints’ Church September 17, 2017

100th Anniversary of Setting Cornerstone Proper 19/Year A

Genesis 50:15-21 Romans 14;1-12

Psalm 103(1-7) 8-13 Matthew 18:21-35

Many of us have heard ourselves say, “I’m having a bad day, or worse, I’m having a bad week.” One thing after another piles up, and you just want to muscle your way through life and get to the other side, somehow, putting everything behind you, in the distant past.

I remember vividly my very first experience of “having a bad week.”

I was six, in first grade- not happy to be in school. I was one of 45 students under the reign of Sister, who was omniscient in her white habit and large hanging crucifix. She carried a Bible in her hand and used it as a way to bring us to attention by banging on it. A banging Bible meant to line up. We lined up for everything. Sister ruled. Sister terrified me.

I hated recess. I just wanted to sit in a corner and read, but that wasn’t allowed. “I had to play,” said Sister, as she pushed me out into the playground. I really didn’t want to hang out with others; I just wanted to be alone, but finally I discovered the game of prison ball, (the metaphor is not lost on me)- I was actually having fun, until one day the big red rubber ball slammed into my face.

I was knocked down and I began to cry- it really hurt. Sister swooped in and brought me to the classroom and told me to sit down at my desk and to calm down, and then she left. (Who does that?)

Yet, it was a beautiful warm spring day. From my seat, I could see all the kids playing, and I was enjoying the light that was streaming in through the open windows….and I was calming down….. until I overheard two of my classmates talking…

“Did you see Jamie get hit in the face?” (Oh, someone noticed).

“Yeah, she’s such a cry baby.”

Well, that did it; I cried the rest of the day. I was inconsolable. Sister didn’t know what to do with me.

The next day, we were all becoming a part of an art project. We were given strips of purple and green, already pre-cut, and under the direction of the art teacher, we were going to weave together on a piece of paper an Easter basket. The teacher kept emphasizing that we could only use a little glue, just a drop, because a lot of glue would ruin the final product, and we didn’t want to blemish our Easter baskets. They were all going to be hung up, displayed in the hallways.

I took her directions very seriously- using a miniscule drop of glue which could barely be seen. And when we were directed to hold up our final product, all of my strips fell onto the floor. Everyone laughed. And I began to cry. I was inconsolable. There were lots of reasons I was crying, as lots of things were going on at home, and I was worried about them, but no one really understood that. Sister didn’t know what to do with me. She finally took me to the Principal’s office.

Another bad day!

The next day, we had our second Easter art project. We had colored paper, sparkles, crayons, markers, glue, and we were told to make an Easter picture by stripping without scissors the colored paper into a picture of joy…. A sunset, a mountain, a grove of trees…. A happy picture.

Well, I got busy. I knew how to use the glue, and I began to tear strips…. Into a cross, into a body on the cross- Jesus. Mary was there as well, prostrate on the ground at the foot of the cross. In the background there was lightening and the ground was breaking open. I was tearing away- in the middle of making the figures of the guards, when Sister showed up. She knelt down at my desk. Knelt down! Oh my God. I could see her eye to eye, feel her breath. And then she leaned in and said to me, “this is so beautiful.”

Of course, I began to cry. She rubbed my back and said, “This is so beautiful.”

I think this may be my first experience of Grace- of feeling unconditional love from an unlikely source, out of nowhere. Grace. I was seen, held, my back rubbed, and my suffering was named as beautiful.

And in all of it, I forgave and felt forgiven. I forgave life, Sister, my classmates, my parents and all the things that were pressing down against me. And I forgave myself, for my fear, and anxiety and tears. I was the Beloved one in whom God was well pleased. I was home in a place called Compassion.

This is our invitation in life- to live in perpetual forgiveness and forgiving because within this sacred place we are mirroring the life of God, that begins and ends, and never ends, in the Merciful Heart.

Often our gospel passage this morning is explained as tit for tat. “Look at how much God forgives you, so then you should forgive others. And if you don’t, look out. The extent of God’s forgiveness is predicated on your capacity to forgive.”

There is some of that message here in this parable, fair enough. And sometimes, we all need to be reminded of the gift of forgiveness we have received. We pray every Sunday in the Our Father, “forgive us our sins ***as*** we have forgiven others.”

And that helps…. It’s our obligation, our duty; it’s about being good disciples, doing the right thing. And thinking of forgiving because we have been forgiven helps us to forgive when we really don’t want to. It helps us to know we can forgive, without having to be reconciled.

It helps us to be free from a grudge or resentment or anger, that are restricting us from living out of our deepest selves. Fair enough.

Yet, if we only see forgiveness in “tit for tat” terms, we lose the extravagance of Jesus’ teaching.

When Peter asks Jesus, “How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”, Peter is showing off. In suggesting seven times, Peter is already going beyond the current teaching of forgiving three times for the same sin. He is learning from Jesus about God’s generosity and suspects that 3X’s might not be enough. He more than doubles it, referencing the holy number of seven. Peter is proud of himself- “See Jesus, I’m getting it!”

No, not quite Peter. Jesus counters by introducing an impossible task. “Not seven times, but, I tell you seventy-seven times.”

That’s impossible… It’s not just 77X… it’s 77X for each offense. At that rate, you are living your life, every minute of it, always forgiving.

You see, that’s the point. God is always forgiving. God is always merciful. God is always steadfast. Here is the question: How are we to live reflecting that perpetual stance of forgiveness?

And then Jesus tells a parable to make his point. A man owes ten thousand talents. One talent was worth fifteen years of wages. In other words, 150,000 years of wages are owed. Might as well be a gazillion dollars. Outrageous amount- beyond the realm of reality. Yet, Forgiveness is given freely, with no conditions. The man in the story does not deserve the weight of his debt to be lifted.

And so what is his response? He should forgive, *but not because if he doesn’t God* *will withhold*. But by forgiving, he has entered into *God’s living*. Becoming more fully human is a spiritual journey that begins and ends in the heart of God. God becomes the Lord of our mind, not the world of Cause and Effect. God is always forgiving. We are invited to live *within* God, by forgiving.

By forgiving, we are creating an empty space within the walls of our inner life in which God can act. We have created a space in which something can happen that we hadn’t planned or counted on. Our heart begins to beat, we lean in, we desire, we hope, and we trust. We anticipate. Something is afoot, and its author is God.

As Sister rubbed my back, for a minute we were both transported into the Holy. She as the image of God, loving me, seeing me, and consoling me, unconditionally, beyond her human capacity. And I became the Beloved, no questions asked. Whatever you’ve done, whatever people say about you, well, I’m not that. Held safe in God’s embrace, I was invited home into my true identity. “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3). I am the Beloved.

That love was there before we were born and will be there after we die.

It is here, in this space offering and receiving forgiveness that community is born. Rooted in this community, our ministry takes root, not as something we do, (though we do a lot) but by something we trust. If we trust, knowing we are the Beloved, and if we keep forgiving those with whom we form community and celebrate their gifts, we cannot do other than minister. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living*, pp. 44-48, 2001).

This is the cornerstone of our faith, leading us into the fulfillment of our deepest longings, as we mold our hearts to greater conformity with God’s own.

Today we celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the setting of the cornerstone to our beautiful church, All Saints’, reminding us of our True Cornerstone: the mystery of our redemption and the power of our true home, called Compassion, called Desire, called the Space where God acts within us. AMEN.