

John Sampson  
"The Holy Mutation"  
Text: Luke 23:32 - 46  
Preached at KVCC  
July 29, 2018

Will you pray with me?

God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

This morning we continue our summer sermon series called Extraordinary Time, which invites us to open our eyes, and our hearts, and our minds to see where God can be found, not out there somewhere else at some other time, but right here and right now in the ordinariness of our lives.

And it was you who gave me the subjects that you would like to hear me reflect upon in this series. One of the most popular of these subjects was forgiveness.

Last week we considered how we could prepare our hearts to forgive, and to ask for forgiveness, through the discipline of repentance. And today we will continue exploring this subject by considering the very boundaries of the possibility of forgiveness.

Because in today's reading we stand before the cross.

We stand in front of the great crime that is so central to our tradition.

We stand before the execution of an innocent man, as he is crucified for telling the forgotten that God remembers them and loves them, while he simultaneously challenges the rich and the powerful to look beyond their self-centered privilege, and open their hearts to their brothers and sisters all around them.

And we are with Jesus in his final moments.

The great question that sits right in the middle of this scene of moral collapse and bottomless inhumanity is whether or not we can find forgiveness even here?

Is the spiritual soil of our hearts rich enough to support the possibility of forgiveness even under these extreme conditions?

And the answer our tradition gives us is, "Yes!"

Yes, even here amid the pain, and the abandonment, among the taunting and the dehumanization, yes even here we hear those unexpected words from Jesus' weak and bloody lips:

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.

But I don't know if you saw the slight of hand I performed in choosing the passage we heard this morning. Last week we heard about the relationship between forgiveness and repentance told from the gospel of Mark. But this week we hear the forgiveness of Jesus on the cross from the gospel of Luke. And that's because in Mark there is no final forgiveness.

In Mark, Jesus is still crucified between two criminals. He's still taunted by the passersby, and prodded to save himself. But words of forgiveness are never uttered from his mouth.

The same goes for the gospel of Matthew. Matthew presents a complex and rich retelling of the crucifixion, but there too there are no words of forgiveness. And the gospel of John is no different. Jesus never forgives those around him, those responsible for making him the victim of the most obscene, and painful death imaginable.

It is only in Luke that we have any record of forgiveness. In our faith tradition's telling of this central story of inhumanity, forgiveness is very much the exception; it is in no way the rule.

I think if we were asked if our tradition tells us we should find a way to forgive one another, regardless of what they have done to us, I think many of us would say yes. We would say that to be followers of Jesus, we must find a way to forgive each other no matter what.

But the discrepancy between this belief, and the actuality of whether or not Jesus forgives those responsible for his execution, complexifies the matter, doesn't it?

It tells us that for most of the authors of our sacred stories forgiveness in the face of the worst crimes that humanity can visit upon itself is not a possibility, not even in the realm of myth, and spiritual storytelling, not even in the presence of the Divine itself. These versions of the crucifixion tell us that there are moments that forgiveness is just not possible.

Think about a moment in your life where forgiveness has not been possible. Where you have not been able to let go of the pain and the hurt that someone else has caused you, or that you have caused another. Think of an experience you've had that overthrew your sense of humanity.

What is that memory?

I've shared with all of you before that I am the survivor of child abuse at the hands of my father. What happened to me when I was young was so traumatic that I have not been able

to forgive him for what he did, and he has made no attempt to repent, to change the way he lives his life, and relates to me. If I were to write a gospel today, there would be no words of forgiveness dropping from my lips for my father. I would be like the authors of Mark. Perhaps many of you can relate to this inability to forgive someone in your life.

And this lack of forgiveness is central to the telling of the story of the crucifixion. I think many times we feel that our tradition just papers over the reality of our lives and gives us platitudes that we can't follow in good faith. But in this episode of Jesus' death we are being shown a mirror of our own lives when Jesus doesn't forgive the perpetrators of his downfall, even as we can't forgive those who have profoundly wronged us. Forgiveness was an issue for biographers of Jesus, the one our tradition calls the Prince of Peace, and the Son of God. And it continues to be an issue for us today. It is an issue for us because just like Jesus we are human, all too human.

When I think about the possibility of forgiveness in the face of the unforgiveable I also think it might be easy for us also to judge others, and ourselves, and say we should forgive. It would be easy to turn the possibility and opportunity of forgiveness into a demand and an imperative.

But can we really tell a man who lived his childhood in a concentration camp that he should forgive those who killed his family, who haunted him with the possibility that at any moment he could join them in death, who starved him until he was a skeleton? Can we really demand of this man that he forgive the men and women who ran the death camp that took so much from him?

Can we really demand of a black woman who was gang raped by a cadre of white youths in South Africa simply because they were bored, and they thought it would be fun to teach her a "lesson" for being in their neighborhood? Can we really demand from this woman that she forgive what was done to her, we who sit so many miles away, and who are mostly white, and racially privileged in this country?

Can we demand of a man who was falsely accused, whose friend turned him over to the guards, whose family abandoned him, who was tortured, and who hangs on a cross breathing his last breath, can we really judge him, and say that he must forgive?

I say no.

I say that we cannot demand forgiveness from those who have had everything taken away from them already. In our hearts and in our minds, we can't judge them and say they must live up to our spiritual ideals. Because to demand forgiveness from those who have experienced the worst of humanity is simply another act of inhumanity that denies them the autonomy of their own being. Such a demand is nothing less than spiritual violence.

But....

But...

In one version of the crucifixion, in one telling of Jesus' execution, in one vision of Jesus' last moments something has happened. There has been a mutation in the story, another possibility in the meaning of the story is unfurled – not as a demand, but I think as an invitation. Not as a judgment, but as a moment of hope.

Because in one version of the story of the crucifixion Jesus offers words of forgiveness to those who are responsible for his death. In this beautiful, and rare mutation Jesus is able to let go of the pain and the hurt and the inhumanity of his death.

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.

Jesus says these words to the criminals who are taunting him from their own crucifixions. Jesus says these words to the soldiers who have stripped him, and beat him, tortured him and mocked him. Jesus says these words of forgiveness to those onlookers who spit at him and tell him to save himself if he is really the Son of God.

In this moment of utter betrayal Jesus experiences a mutation deep in his heart, and instead of remaining silent he opens his mouth, and he offers words of healing.

Maybe Jesus can do this because he knows he is about to die, and he has let go of any vestiges of the self that would demand retribution, and a balancing of accounts. Maybe at that moment he understands the truly radical nature of God's love, that it exists everywhere, and at all times and he sees how he can live into its truth, even in the darkest places of human experience. Maybe the authors of Luke might not have been able to put words of forgiveness in Jesus' mouth if they had written their account of his death when it happened, but because so many years have passed since the events they describe they were able to forgive on behalf of Jesus.

I think there are many possible reasons why Jesus shares words of forgiveness only in the book of Luke. But I think for us, today, here in this room, we are shown an image of what could be in our lives, against all hope, and against all experience. We're shown an icon of opportunity to let go of the hurt others have done to us, perhaps that we have done to ourselves, a hurt that may seem unforgivable.

This icon is shown to us not to demand that we forgive, against our hearts and the sanctity of our lives, but to show us that forgiveness is a path we could take when we are ready, and if we can hear its call.

And when we are ready, only when we are ready, God promises us to do a new thing in our hearts, to allow us to experience a holy mutation in our souls so that where we may have been silent in the face of the worst experiences of our lives, our hearts can be freed, and our mouths can be opened, and we can offer a true forgiveness to others, as an act of love and reconciliation.

For as Darwin said, “from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved.” Even redemption. Even love. Even in the face of the unforgiveable.

Amen.