

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

I would like to share with you a story offered by the Reverend Dennis Maynard.

“The story is told of a little girl in a small village who reported to her parents that she was having conversations with God. Her faith was so sincere and her descriptions so believable that her parents reported the occurrence to their pastor. He was astounded by what appeared to be a miraculous event. So, he decided to make visit with the family.

The pastor talked with the little girl and he decided to test her experience. ‘Next time you talk to God, the pastor asked her, “Ask God to list for you the sins that I prayed to God for forgiveness.”

A few weeks went by and the pastor returned to the house to meet with the little girl. “Did you ask God to list for you the sins that I prayed to God for forgiveness?” “Yes, I asked God for a list of your sins, the little girl responded.” “And what did God tell you?” the pastor asked. The little girl began to laugh and dance around the room. “God told me he forgot.”

Forgiveness. A word that evokes many different emotions and an action that we know needs to be acted on but holds in captivity. It remains inconceivable to us that we can be forgiven for our transgressions. We are weak and we make mistakes; as the old BCP said it so well, we are guilty of sins of omission and sins of commission. If we are so weak and vulnerable why is it so inconceivable to understand that people that we hold in deep trust are also weak and vulnerable? Remember, that the same God who has forgotten all our sins of omission and commission has forgotten theirs too. But we are like elephants; we never forget! And it is our inability to forget that keeps many of us locked away.

The verses in Romans are familiar to Episcopalians. Verses 7 and 8 are found in the opening anthem in our Burial Rite: ““We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” Paul’s Letter to the Church in Rome goes on and asks the question “why do you pass judgment on your brother and sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”

If we are the Lord’s, which I am happy to say that “yes, we are” and God has a short term memory as to our missteps and foibles, this same God has a short term memory as to the sins of the person or persons that we have such a difficult time forgiving.

What happened in the Gospel reading is a story as much about showing mercy as it is about forgiveness. A slave is forgiven by his master; more specifically his debt is forgiven. This same man, the man who was shown mercy, turns around and denies the same forgiveness to a man who owes him money. When the lord of the manor hears about what the forgiven slave has done, he hands him over to be tortured until the entire debt is paid. The story ends with the promise that God will do the same thing to us if we do not forgive our brother and sister.

The Reverend Rick Morley offers this reflection.

“Oh, how I love this parable. If ever there were someone who got what they deserved, it’s this weasel! He owed a debt of 10,000 talents. A talent was equivalent to a year’s wage. In 2013 in America, the median yearly income was a little over \$51,000. So, in 2013, 10,000 talents would be worth a little over 500 million dollars. Imagine opening up a bill for that. And then imagine that debt being forgiven. Wouldn’t you be a little relieved? Perhaps even a little overjoyed? Maybe you’d want to pass it on?”

“Not our little weasel, though. After being forgiven 500 million, another slave owed him about 18 thousand dollars. And he seized him, and had him thrown into jail. When the Master, who had forgiven the half billion heard about this injustice he had him seized and tortured, until he could repay the debt, which was of course...never! Isn’t it delicious! The weeping! The gnashing! O, the justice!!

“But then these words of a Jesus haunt me...Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ Oh, crud...The weasel is me. I’ve been shown so much mercy. SO much mercy. More mercy in fact than I’m comfortable going into on The Internets...Who am I to judge another? Why can’t I have mercy on this huge weasel?”

*“And, THAT’S what this passage is about. Mercy. Extravagant, ridiculous, over-the-top mercy. Not just on the undeserving, but **ESPECIALLY** on the undeserving. (Mercy wouldn’t be mercy if it were somehow earned...). It’s so easy to want to climb on top of another. It’s so easy to want to claim the higher ground, and proclaim myself better than someone else. But, that is not the way of Jesus. Jesus’ way is the way of mercy.”*

Again, from today’s Gospel reading: “And in anger his Lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart”.

God means business...“in his anger...handed him over to be tortured”. Or perhaps the correct translation is that God allows us to hand ourselves over to be tortured by our conscience...a self-inflicted torture, if you will.

For a long time, I tried to forget certain aspects of my childhood years...especially the period that I was in elementary school. There were years in the Fifties that were shrouded in darkness and I really tried to leave it there. But my anger and resentments would not allow me to remove the shroud and expose that era of my life to the light. When I entered my forties, I realized that the time had come to find the key to open the self-imposed cell that I had been in. With the help of God and Regina and friends, “forgiveness” replaced “bitterness” and peace began to replace anguish. God did not hand me over to be tortured; I did that all on my own. But God never left me and was just waiting to provide the key to unlock the door.

Forgiveness is not easy; sometimes we like to hold on to our anger and bitterness. Forgiveness is a tortuous road to walk. But as God has forgiven each one of us, it is our calling to forgive those who have wronged us. The rewards of doing so far outweigh doing nothing. For in forgiving, we are given the key to unlock the cell door and we are set free.

I would like to close with a poem from the Reverend Andrew King:

FORGIVENESS IS . . .

[Matthew 18: 21-35](#)

Forgiveness is sending flowers
with a card of congratulations

to one who has come through
suffering: yourself.

Forgiveness is taking the stone
that broke the blade of the plow
and transferring it to the center
of your garden.

Forgiveness is digging a hole
into cracked and thirsty earth
and not just pouring in water
but planting a tree.

Forgiveness is emptying the goblet
into which you poured the poison
and placing it, clean and shining,
on the farthest shelf.

Forgiveness is shaking loose
the pinched, cracked skin
you have been living in
and leaving it behind for the crows.

Forgiveness is tearing in two the curtains
that enclosed your heart's hurting
and letting in the dusty light
to bathe the wound.

Forgiveness is removing the pins
from the wings of two
dead butterflies
and watching both those butterflies
fly away free.

AMEN