

Things have taken an interesting turn with Jesus in Matthew this morning. Last week we heard about the process for dealing with conflict in the church, how to bring about reconciliation “if another member of the church sins against you.”

Be proactive. Stir up your courage and “point out the fault,” the wrong done you, privately, one on one with the offender. If you don’t get satisfaction, gradually bring others from the community. After all, conflict affects the whole body. If the other person listens, you have regained a friend, relationship is restored and renewed.

Now, thanks to Peter’s question, there’s a shift. We’re talking about forgiveness now. “How often should I forgive?” It’s not all about the offender now. There’s something for the victim to do, an obligation. There is mutual responsibility in the relationship to reconcile.

Jesus illustrates with a outrageous parable. We miss its full impact because he speaks in terms of the coin of the realm in first century Palestine. We need a bit of translation. A talent was the most valuable coin of the time. Its value was the equivalent of 15 years’ wages for a laborer. Fifteen years times ten thousand The value of a denarius was one hundred days’ wages. So . . .

Forgiveness is integral not only for the community, but also for the kingdom of heaven, like this A slave has run up a ridiculously large debt: 150,000 years’ worth of a laborer’s wages. (How the king ever let that happen isn’t an issue. It’s just a given.) Brought before the king, the slave makes a ludicrous plea for the king’s patience, as if any amount of time would be enough to come up with the money. Not even Warren Buffett could come up with this much cash.

Amazingly, the king has pity on him. Releases him. Forgives him the debt. Nobody could be that generous. His kindness and compassion are like God’s!

But the slave somehow is clueless. (Maybe the same kind of cluelessness that fed into his improbably huge debt.) It's as if he doesn't realize what he's just been given, hasn't taken it in. He hasn't taken it in. Else he would be changed by it. He would realize he's just been given back his life, and the lives of his wife and children. He misses it, though, loses the new future he's given; and so ends up in darkness and torment.

That's scary. Does it mean that God's mercy and forgiveness might be withdrawn? If our hearts are hard and we do not forgive? Or is it about our own choice?

Forgiveness is complicated. Doesn't seem to come naturally, at least not to most of us. It has to be learned, and practiced. This is where Peter's question comes in. *Should I forgive seven times?* (He's feeling expensive, quite virtuous, hoping for Jesus' approval here.) But no. Not seven, but seventy-seven; or, in some versions, seven times seventy. That is, without number, as often as the occasion arises. But with the conversations, presumably. And in the community that is always learning and practicing forgiveness—learning and practicing for being part of the realm of God, on earth and in heaven.

Forgiveness is fraught with feelings, but it is not, ultimately, about how we feel. It is a *decision* to release the other person from owing you for what has been done. Loose your hold on the other and you also are freed. It is a choice not to remain in darkness and torment. It is not condoning what has been done. It's not forgetting, but, rather, taking what happened seriously and refusing to let it poison either one of us or weigh us down.

Forgiveness may be a long process. It is not easy. No one can force you to forgive. You can't make yourself forgive. It calls for a change of heart, which is the work of the Spirit. I can invite the Spirit in. It may start with just deciding I am willing to do that. Maybe I am not willing to forgive. But maybe I am willing to become willing to forgive.

Forgiveness is important and necessary not only in the church but also in the family and the wider community. In this, it is like Paul's words to the church at Rome, about living with difference, tolerating others who see and

do things differently, not despising or passing judgment. What is true for the community of the church is true also for the wider community and among people of different faiths. Whatever the days we observe as holy, whatever foods we eat or abstain from eating, our traditions and practices return honor and thanks to God. We are the Lord's, whoever we are.

We also heard a reading from the Book of Exodus this morning, the story of the crossing of the Red Sea. It is a foundational story for Jews and Christians. We read it every year at the Great Vigil of Easter. In it we Celebrate the Lord's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the crossing over from death into freedom and new life. The enemy army is defeated. The oppressive grip of empire is broken. Justice is done. The Israelites see the Egyptians dead on the seashore. It is a moment of triumph.

There is a midrash, a traditional Jewish story about the story. A midrash is told to probe a story in Scripture, to ask a question about it. This is the midrash I know about the crossing of the Red Sea.

When the Israelites had passed through the Red Sea on dry land, and Pharaoh's army was drowned, there was a great celebration in heaven. All the angels were singing and dancing, blowing trumpets. Lots of noise and gaiety. When the Lord heard it, he came and asked the heavenly host, "What is all this celebrating?"

"O Lord God, your people have crossed through the Red Sea. You have set them free. All Pharaoh's army is dead and gone."

And the Lord said, "The Egyptians are my people, too."

I have another image of the aftermath of the story. An image of standing on the far shore, and looking back to Egypt. Seeing the drowned Egyptians, remembering the cries that rose in the night from all the houses of Egypt at the deaths of their first-born. Knowing the grace of liberation, God's granting a new future—freedom, land, prosperity, security. And, at the same time, seeing and mourning the terrible cost.

There is no straight line from 9/11 to this image. We can't equate the Israelites or the Egyptians with anyone in that story; but the stories are connected. There's a connection in the recognition, voiced by theologian Serene Jones, that violence leaves a stain in the community. That there are "reverberations of violence whether or not we caused it." It would seem that the stain and reverberations are present in both communities, that of the victims of the violence and that of the perpetrators.

For me, the connection between the aftermath of the Red Sea and of 9/11 is compassion, compassion for everyone—strangers, enemies, friends—whose lives are affected by ongoing reverberations of violence. That is all of us.

Somehow the Gospel text about forgiveness also cuts across these events. Something like forgiveness is needed. It is not my place to forgive the murders of the people in the World Trade towers, the Pentagon, or the planes; they did not touch me directly. But I have to forgive and let go any resentment about the ways in which my life has been changed because of the 9/11 attacks and later threats, ways all our lives have been changed to one degree or another.

In the days and weeks after 9/11, Bill Moyers asked his television guests something like this: how we are to live now in a world where people of extreme beliefs not only threaten to monopolize our discourse, but some also resort to acts of violence and terror to influence the direction of history. One guest responded something like this: all the people of good will have to come together to exert their influence for mutual understanding and peace.

People of good will are people of many faiths, and no faith, who have the capacity and willingness to practice tolerance, forgiveness and compassion.

In the days after 9/11, people around the world expressed compassion for the people of New York, Washington, Pennsylvania, and for all of us in this country who were deeply shocked and afraid. We had never experienced such grief and fear from an attack on our own soil. We were welcomed, with sadness and kindness, into a new, shared, daily awareness of the frailty and

vulnerability of life, of our mortality, an awareness with which people in many other countries have lived for a long time. A few rejoiced at our injury; but the mutual sense of connection was much stronger and more universal.

Jean Vanier says that forgiveness is grounded in recognizing our commonality: that everyone has worth, that human redemption is possible, and that, at our core, every one of us longs for unity and peace. The same things are true of tolerance and compassion.

As we turn and walk away from the Red Sea, what new life can we see that may lie ahead of us? What opportunities for more tolerance, forgiveness, compassion? What possibilities of love that will, in time, remove the stain of violence and quiet its reverberations—until we vibrate with the love of the One to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.