

WANDERING HEART: FIGURING OUT FAITH WITH PETER¹

Psalm 119:9-16 ~ Matthew 18:15-22

"Teach Me"

Fifth Sunday in Lent ~ March 17, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction

If you had Jesus right here, in human form, ready to answer any question you might have for him, what would you ask? What questions would you really like to ask God? I'm sure you have lots of them. Think about one or two and then turn to someone sitting near you and share what questions popped into *your* mind. I will give you 30 seconds, and then 30 seconds for the second person. First, Find your person. Okay. Ready, set, go....

My next invitation may seem like my clever way of getting you to complete the Nominating Committee reference sheets. However, in the spirit of this sermon titled, "Teach me," I am inviting you to write down on the back of your blue insert a question or a topic you would like to hear a sermon on. A question that perhaps you keep hoping I will address from the pulpit, but somehow never really do. I hope to use those questions to create a summer series of sermons based on your questions. Right now, we will hear a reading from the Gospel of Matthew where Peter asks Jesus a question. It is actually a follow-up question to Jesus in response to the set of instructions Jesus has just given them about how to practice forgiveness within a faith community. Let us listen for the whisper of the Spirit through the Word as I read Matthew 18:15-22.

Sermon

"There are no dumb questions." Right? I'm sure you've heard someone say that a time or two. Questions from people to God or to Jesus throughout the Bible, bear witness to this truth. Questions that open the heart to deeper truths we are still grabbling with. Such as: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Cain asks God, Gen. 4:9); or "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Moses to God, Exodus 3:11); "And who is my neighbor?" (The lawyer to Jesus, Luke 10:29); "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (the Samaritan woman to Jesus, John 4:9); and here in Matthew 18, verse 1 this whole chapter launched with a question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (the disciples to Jesus, Matthew 18:1). And now today's question from Peter to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church or "my brother" sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as, seven times?" (Matt. 18:21)

All good questions. Jesus teaches us again and again, even though we may be asking the wrong question, if it's a question on your heart, is important and valuable. Any question asked in the spirit of curiosity and a genuine desire to learn, is golden. Why? Because whatever the question, its subtext is, "Teach me." I believe all the teachers in the room will agree. Quick survey, please raise your hand if you are, or have ever been, a teacher at one time or another in your life... (We Presbyterians are teacher rich, indeed!) I am sure that all of you teachers would concur:

we love it when we ask, "Are there any questions?" And then student hands shoot up in the air, eager to be called upon.

You see our questions, however awkward, are the door to going beyond the mind we have. Certainly, Peter's question to Jesus today, about how often you are supposed to forgive a person who has wronged you, is a tough one. And Jesus' answer was even tougher. We are to forgive not just seven (which I'm sure Peter thought was very generous), but seventy-seven times? That's a lot of times. This is likely an allusion Jesus was making to Gen 4:24 where Lamech proudly boasts to his wives that he will avenge himself seventy-sevenfold on anyone who dares to attack him. Jesus is teaching Peter and the rest of us that forgiveness is the opposite of revenge. "Getting even" is not a thing if you want to follow the way of Christ.

In some ancient manuscripts Jesus' answer is translated as seventy times seven: yes, that would equal 490 times. Either way the message is loud and clear: through the use of numbers, Jesus is teaching us: forgiveness is *not* a numbers thing. How do you calculate the ambiguous math of grace? Truly the language of numbers is inappropriate when one contemplates forgiveness. Perhaps Peter was asking the wrong question. But it was not a dumb question. There are no dumb questions.

Remember last Sunday when I started my "I'm Fixed Upon It" sermon by listing 3 certainties: the sun will rise, $2 + 2 = 4$, and this service will not end at 10:30 A.M.? All still true today. But I have two more to add: one about us, and one about God. We all certainly have miscommunicated, misunderstood, and unintentionally hurt one another. And we will certainly continue to do so, no matter how hard we try not to. These mess ups are even more likely to occur when we get over tired, overscheduled, or are already overstressed. Certainly: we all mess up. Again and again. Sad, but true. Surely, the ground at the foot of the cross is even and level. The second one, the certainty about God from Genesis through Revelation, is the good news: Forgiveness is at the heart of God. And in Christ, forgiveness is a person. Forgiveness has a face. As Jesus said to his disciples, "for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Friends, the face of forgiveness is among us, right now.

And yet, I can see and hear questions roiling in your minds and hearts about how hard it is to actually *practice* the giving and receiving of forgiveness here on the ground, in the block and tackle of our everyday lives. What do we do with our feelings of anger, hurt, sorrow, or fear, when trying to forgive? Is forgiveness a onetime act of will? Or is it a deepening process? Can we set limits and borders within forgiveness? Is forgiveness possible at all if there has been severe, long-term abuse? Are there things which we should *not* forgive? Does God *really* forgive everything? How do we forgive God for allowing such cruel abuse and inhumanity in the world? Does forgiveness imply complete restoration of former relationships? How do we forgive a whole community, such as a dysfunctional family, an ethnic group, a whole nation? Is it possible to forgive what happened generations ago? Most of us struggle with these and similar good questions.

How often have we prayed, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” and still, honestly, wonder how to possibly do this? Mitchell Atencio, begins his article titled, “Why Are Christians So Bad At Forgiveness?” right there: “I remember the moment I became wholly dissatisfied with Christian conceptions of forgiveness. While walking into church for a Sunday morning class on the Lord’s Prayer, I realized that I did not know how to “forgive others” as God had forgiven me. Defining forgiveness as “moving past and forgetting harm” was vague and hard to fathom. I had repeatedly seen the powerful weaponize the instruction to “forgive” against the oppressed and abused: Black people told to “forgive” the U.S. for chattel slavery; women told to “forgive” husbands who abused them; survivors of sexual violence told to “forgive” the church. Surely, this was *not* the forgiveness Jesus instructed. But I couldn’t escape the feeling that “forgive” was still a command for Christians to follow.”

Mitchell asked Chanequa Walker-Barnes, a Womanist theologian and clinical psychologist (professor of practical theology and pastoral care at Columbia Theological Seminary) specifically how to understand this instruction of Jesus’ instruction to Peter, that he must forgive 70 times seven times. Let her teach you, as she has taught me about this very question. “As a clinician, she knows that forgiveness (and its opposite: unforgiveness) is not something we “just decide,” but rather involves an ongoing process, partially connected to our biology, neurochemistry, and trauma history.”

She refers to Everett Worthington’s distinction between “decisional forgiveness” and “emotional forgiveness.” That is the difference between “*deciding to forgive*” and “*reaching the point of forgiveness*.” She explains, “the two are part of the same process, but often one happens before the other.” What I hear Jesus calling Peter and the rest of us to do is to decide to forgive and be committed to the process of forgiving others as often as we possibly can. But that does not necessarily mean we will always reach whole and complete emotional forgiveness—that’s part of our humanity.”

If Jesus were sitting next to you in the pew, his question would be, not “have you forgiven this person completely?” But rather: “Are you intentionally working on developing a forgiving disposition?” She said, “Jesus knows it may take some time and is not asking us to rush it. Nor is it a one and done kind of thing. The 77 times or 7 x 70 is Jesus tipping his hat to the fact that forgiveness is repetitive. It is cyclical. It takes time. We’ve often treated forgiveness as if it’s supposed to be a magic wand that restores everything. But even Jesus is saying, “You might have to forgive him again and again.” Scripture, from the very beginning, shows us that relationships are hard. And part of relationship is to forgive over and over.”ⁱⁱ

Maybe that’s one of the reasons we keep coming to church week after week. Or maybe it’s the coffee... Seriously: every week we pray the Lord’s Prayer, where the petition to be forgiven and to forgive is at the very center. Forgiveness is also at the heart of our Holy Communion sacrament. In the Words of Institution that I say before pouring the wine/juice, Jesus says, “this cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins, do this remembering me.” Jesus, the very face of forgiveness, knew how hard forgiveness can be for us. Firsthand. His ultimate test was about to take place the next day on the cross.

Friends, we have just two more weeks in Lent before Easter. Lent is a season for teachable hearts to open to God in new and unexpected ways. Lent beckons us to be students in the school of Christ. Jesus saying to us, "Ask away! I'm here for you and your questions. Raise up those hands. Open your minds and your hearts."

If you think about it, the opening of the heart is the purpose of spirituality, in essence. What do you need to learn from God today? I have saved a prayer to close my sermon about the opening of the heart from Dag Hammarskjöld. He was a Swedish diplomat and Secretary General of the United Nations in the middle of the 20th century. He was also a Christian mystic, though few knew this during his lifetime. He kept a journal that was discovered after his death in a peacekeeping mission in the Congo. In it he wrote this prayer:

*Give us pure hearts, that we may see you,
Humble hearts, that we may hear you;
Hearts of love, that we may serve you;
Hearts of faith, that we may abide in you.* ⁱⁱⁱ

One question at a time. Amen.

ⁱ A Sanctified Art LLC/ sanctifiedart.org Lenten Theme 2024 Series.

ⁱⁱ <https://sojo.net/articles/reconstruct/why-are-christians-so-bad-forgiveness?> by Mitchell Atencio, October 21, 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ From Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, trans. W. H. Auden and Leif Sjöberg (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p.93, as quoted in Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, (Harper: San Francisco, CA, 2003), p. 163.