

March 26, 2017

Lent IV

Luke 23:32-43

Choosing Love!

We just sang Mark Miller's composition:

In the midst of pain I choose love...

How impossibly hard is that? Our scripture words are of Jesus, in the midst of dying, forgiving all of those who had a part in his death: those who colluded, conspired, stood by, mocked him, even those who didn't care.

But he's Jesus, right? We're human. We can't possibly be expected to do that! And yet, every Sunday we gather we pray earnestly:

Forgive us OUR trespasses, as WE forgive those who trespass against us.

(which basically is:

Forgive everything we do wrong and horrible and because of misunderstanding or illness or personality defect or circumstance..

Just as we forgive EVERYONE who to US does US wrong and horrible, or because of misunderstanding, or illness or personality defect or circumstance.

Well if we HAVE to do that by Jesus' example and his expectation of us... How in heaven's name do we do that?

There are many iconic stories about unbelievable forgiveness in the face of horrific acts. But for me today, I want to lift up two, that for me, are two of the most dramatic stories I know: of stark, almost unbelievable forgiveness in recent years:

The first one took place on Oct. 2, 2006, near Nickle Mines, Penn., in an Amish community. A young man stormed into the one-room Amish schoolhouse shooting ten girls, and killing five. A community, a nation, and the world was stunned that such an act of violence could be visited upon this peace-loving, cloistered community... let alone young school girls. It turns out the shooter was the milk truck driver doing his usual deliveries. He came prepared. And when it was over he shot himself.





There was enough shock and awe, and inconsolable grief to last a lifetime. However what happened next also caught all of our attention.

This Amish community not only said immediately it forgave the shooter, but went above and beyond words to action. Members of the community went right away to the home of the shooter's widow and three young children to offer her care, concern, and money for her own suddenly upside-down life. Even some of the parents

of the victims, after burying their own daughters, attended her husband's funeral and surrounded her with love and hugs.

Forgiveness for the Amish is a community-wide response to any offense.

They hold no grudges ... but together.. in the midst of their pain and anguish and all the unanswered questions, as a community to come together to do the work of their own healing.

There are no simplistic easy answers here. And lest we (or anyone) misunderstand that what they did in offering unasked for forgiveness erased their sorrow or their righteous anger, listen to their own words:

"It took several years before most of us could actually feel as though we had forgiven him and even now we have to go through that process again." (father of Anna Mae Stoltzfus)

"Today those parents want the world to know that while the decision to forgive was made quickly – actually forgiving was a process that took years....It's still a choice, even today."

To forgive does not mean you have gotten over it to the other side of reconciling what has happened; but it DOES mean you take the first steps of words and action.

Forgiveness is choice. ***In the midst of pain I choose love.***

The second story of forgiveness took place June 17, 2015, in the basement of a church at the end of a small group Bible study; and it is the tragedy at **Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church** in Charleston SC.

The shooter, a young man, went to that spot with the express intention of killing. He was welcomed into the bible study, and sat there with them for 45 minutes. And then at the end shot 12 people, killing nine.



In the midst of so much pain and senseless violence in such a sacred spot, many of the families stated to the killer almost immediately “I forgive you,” and kept up that mantra through the arraignment, memorial service and trial and sentencing.

Alana Simmons, whose grandfather Daniel Simmons was among those killed, said she forgave the shooter:

"Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, everyone's plea for your soul is proof that they lived in love, and their legacies will live in love. So hate won't win."



But perhaps the most heartfelt words came from Nadine Collier, the daughter of victim Ethel Lance.

"You took something very precious away from me," she said, her voice cracking. "I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. But God forgives you, and I forgive you."

In the midst of pain, I choose love.

Two stories of forgiveness .. in the face of senseless violence and cruelty and any lack of repentance or even asking to be forgiven; it is the impossible. Where does such strength of spirit and faith come from?

As ***The New Republic*** wrote, *“Christian forgiveness, especially when (as in the Emmanuel church case) repentance is absent, is a gesture toward God vis-à-vis the forgiven person. It is calamitously painful.”*

We all have stories where we find it hard to even begin the forgiving process. And we know there are countless more stories around the world and in history, where **we** know we could **not forgive**.

And yet both these stories are stories where people of faith CHOSE a different way ... predicated on their understanding of Jesus.

And like Jesus... in both these stories, there is an absence of contrition or repentance.

How do you do that? How does one possibly have the wherewithal in the mere *moments* following such tragedy, to unilaterally forgive?

What tears us apart these days?

Is it a need to be right?
 A need to win?
 A need to be on the right side?
 Has the notion of **forgiveness** become outdated?
 Naïve? Unrealistic? A relic of the past?

In the midst of the Christian message comes this **heart** of who Jesus was:
 to forgive no matter what ...
 to forgive **even** in the midst of: anger ... hatred Judgement
 bullying ostracization .. falsehoods ..
 harm ... retaliation...
 the list goes on and on.

There is “no loophole” for US to forgive.

But... does that mean we lie down, roll over and take it?
 Is that what Jesus did? (Some might think so)

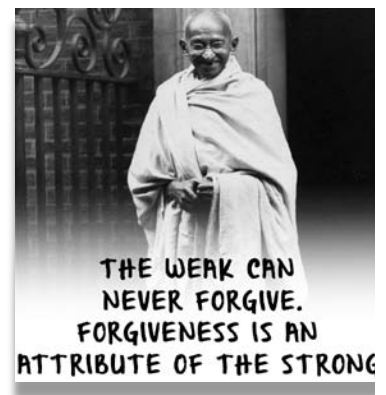
I think forgiveness is more for **us**:
 to free us ... to tie us into something divine.

If I look to Jesus as the prime example of forgiveness ...
 It means to keep one’s integrity, full faculties ...
 to be articulate and honest and then
 step into the place where angels dwell.

I listened to one psychologist in the wake of the Amish tragedy say:
***Forgiveness has the most profound healing power,
 it releases the person from reliving that trauma again and again.***

The victims’ families in both these stories weren’t focused
 on addressing the perpetrator directly.
 They were talking about their pain, their loved ones’ faith,
 and what it will take for them to heal.

Read the words of forgiveness from some of these famous and
 historical folks who know a thing or two about being wronged.
 (see photos and quotes)



We live in the precarious times of fake news,

and inflammatory tweets,
 sound bytes,
 social media provocations...
 that are all meant to
 incite,
 misinform,
 take advantage of,
 bully.

How do we respond? ...
 In the midst of *hard* and seemingly *impossible*,
We to choose love.

What does that mean?

Love is something we choose... consciously... intentionally.
 It is a choice. It is counter-intuitive.
 It is counter-cultural.
 But it is the Jesus way..
 We cannot pray the Lord's prayer w/o out it.



And then, what does '**communities of forgiveness**' mean?

It is exactly what is modeled for us in these two stories.

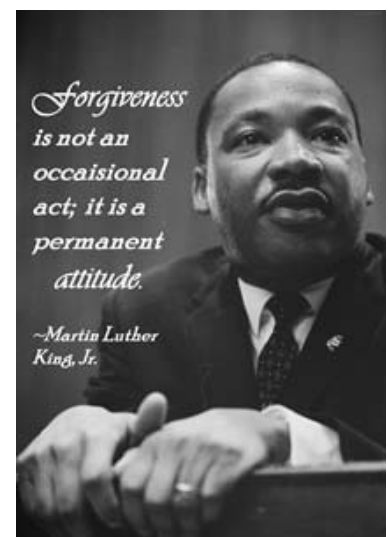
Is it that **we...** our church live with a collective consciousness of the forgiveness
 of not putting our own **feelings** first
 ... and that when we feel injured...unheard...dismissed,
 we can still live with the integrity of our beliefs
 without having to get back and have the last word.

And key to this whole impossibility is Jesus himself with his
 words at his Last Supper:

***I give you a new commandment:
 that you love one another.***

How do we do it in our own lives?
 How do we do it as a community of faith?
 How do we do it with integrity, honesty,
 And without guile
 or need for payback?

How do we do it knowing..



that it doesn't mean we win the argument,
or make points for our side?

Perhaps we look to these brave examples of
those who have done exactly that ..
and of those who have followed in the footsteps
of the one who set this example.

Perhaps we remember that attitude *follows* action...

And if together we can explore this,
wrestle with this,
support this,
stand for this..

then we become that *community of forgiveness*..
where..
In the midst of pain, we choose love.

Amen.