

Some of you may recall back to your Sunday school years – not long and very long and all in between – ago. One story that always made me sad was the story of the creation of the 10 commandments.

If you don't recall, let me sum up. The people who were wandering the desert – after being freed from Egypt and having crossed the Red Sea – were now camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai. This mountain is the same where Moses was shepherding his father in law's flock and witnessed Yahweh in a bush that was on fire but not burning. Sinai was considered to be a holy mountain.

When Moses and Hebrews came to the mountain, Yahweh instructed Moses to climb the mountain alone. Here Yahweh spoke to Moses – for many days – so many that the people on the plain at the foot of the mountain became concerned – thinking that Moses had left them. Besides they were also uncomfortable, some of them missing their homes and possessions that they left behind in Egypt. They begged Aaron, Moses' brother, to help them melt down their fine gold and other metals.

According to his explanation to Moses in Exodus 32:24, Aaron “threw the gold into the fire, and out came this calf!” Many of the Hebrew people bowed down to it and sang over it and partied around it, praising it as a representation of the gods who brought them out of Egypt.

Well, when Yahweh heard this, the LORD was ready to smite them THEN AND THERE. Moses went down the mountain, threw down and broke the tablets with God's word on them. He then melted down the statue, put it in the stream – and made the people drink from it. Then he called forth anyone who was faithful to Yahweh – and the men from the tribe of Levi came forward. Moses commanded them to kill anyone they saw – 3000 were killed that day.

The next day, Moses interceded to God for the people – Yhwh was fairly angry and bade the people go to the land flowing with milk and honey – but Yahweh would not go with them. Moses and God had a discussion – where each spoke their minds and reasoned with each other. Yahweh decided to give it another go – and so Moses went up that mountain again. But this time, Yahweh added a clause to the blessing for the people. Yahweh said,

Exodus 34:6-7

What I find so striking about this passage is what sounds to me as a contradiction. Yes, Yahweh will forgive sin – but will hold the children and grandchildren responsible for their parent's sin to the 3rd and 4th generation...

While, true, it is a turn of phrase used more in the Old Testament than in the New, people at the time of Jesus still held it to be literally something that God would do to punish. And then they could use this to explain away why there were different castes, people with disabilities, and why bad things happened. Like the story of the man born blind who was given sight by Jesus, the people questioned ‘who was it that sinned – he or his parents?’ Obviously, SOMEONE had sinned or God wouldn't have given him such a diagnosis.

And isn't it something we do too – kind of unconsciously – We sometimes hold on to the sins of others too. “They can't hold a job because their family is notoriously “good for nothings”. “I don't trust him because his father was a liar – blood will out.” “Oh, she's a *insert last name here* . **That** explains everything.

In our heart of hearts, we hold our prejudices close to us – for we are ashamed of them – legacies of hate for different cultures, colours, countries, politics.

What we do and how we forgive and who we forgive or don't forgive – even if we try to hide it – is seen by our intuitive and innocent children and our children's children... this too is a sin that is passed on and, unless we break the cycle and work on our sins – reconciliation will not happen.

We know that God forgives – and gives blessings and loves us and yearns for us and desires for us to show this same blessing to the world. But we also know that God holds us accountable for what we have done – so that the lessons we have learned are passed down to our children and their children and their children – to the 4th generation. God's forgiveness is extravagant – but it is not glibly given.

In our New Testament scripture today, Jesus addresses sin and forgiveness within the community of believers. Prior to what I'm about to read, we hear the famous Matthew 18 passage – the one that Mennonite's just love. You know the one, "When your brother or sister sins against you go to them privately and try to work it out – and so on and so on until finally if they still will not help make it right – let them go and move on. That's a whole different sermon right there.

Today's scripture borders this passage, although it could have possibly happened at a different time. No matter, it continues the theme of debt, sin and forgiveness and gives us a glimpse – a right glimpse of the nature of God as seen through the lens of Jesus. In Matthew 18:21-35 we read:

Like so many of Jesus' parables, this one trades in hyperbole. The first slave owes an OBSCENE amount to the king. To put it in perspective, a denarii is about a day's wage. 1 talent is about 5,475 denarii – A talent was roughly equal to about 15 years worth of wages for the typical worker. The first slave owed the king about 10000 talents – that's about 150,000 years worth of income. No single person could EVER repay it – even if they were to sell everything and everyone in their small city. In an outrageous act of generosity and mercy, the king graciously forgave this unforgivable debt so that it would not rest on the slaves' or his family's head for the next 4 generations.

The second slave owed the first slave 100 denarii – about 100 days' work – about 17 weeks or a little over 4 months worth of wages. Compared to the first – this is a miniscule amount. It is no wonder that the king was angry with the first slave when he did not forgive the debt of the 2nd slave. The king granted his slave a level of forgiveness that exceeded imagination and yet, that slave was unwilling to offer even the smallest mercy to another.

Of course, Jesus' parables are multi-valent – there are always so many meanings that we can glean from them. We do well not to pigeonhole specific people or deities into the characters of the parables. Instead, to read these parables as examples of characteristics of the kingdom of God. In this case, Jesus is expanding on his comment to Peter about forgiveness – and what that looks like in God's kingdom. In God's kingdom – forgiveness is extravagantly given – 70x7 times – but those who are forgiven are still held to account.

Those in the kingdom forgive their brothers and sisters beyond their ability to keep track. If we are keeping track, it is not really forgiveness at all. Keeping track simply means that we are waiting for our

neighbor to cross some line. But Jesus calls this behaviour into question. If you keep count, it is not called forgiveness.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, looked at the evils of Naziism dead in the face – while many of his sisters and brothers turned a blind eye. Bonhoeffer warned that we must never allow forgiveness to be reduced to "cheap grace."

Forgiveness is not pretending that an offence didn't happen, or a wound doesn't hurt. Forgiveness doesn't excuse a behaviour, but looks deeply at the wrong done.

We don't hear much about righteous anger in the Mennonite Church, but is this not what Jesus did? Remember him cleansing the temple with a whip? Remember him blasting the religious hypocrites of his day for oppressing the poor? Remember him rebuking his disciples for blocking children from his presence?

Christ, who calls us to forgive, also calls us to mourn, to lament, to speak truth to power, and to hunger and thirst for righteousness. There is absolutely NOTHING Christ-like about responding to systemic evil with passive acceptance and complicity.

Yes, Jesus forgave. But he also raged. He called out anyone who treated others poorly. He condemned the oppression of the most vulnerable people in society.

Forgiveness does not turn away and ignore a wrong done.

In other words, there is a time to get angry and stay angry. A time to insist on change. A time to say, "Enough is enough."

Yes, we are called to practice and preach forgiveness. But I believe it is also the task of the church to take sin as seriously as Jesus did — with impassioned and sustained cries for justice. Forgiveness doesn't mean we cannot be angry. It doesn't mean we overlook offenses. Forgiveness holds the other accountable.

I think that this is a good way to understand our Old Testament scripture too. Yes, God forgives – and blesses – but God also expects us to repent and reorient ourselves to the Kingdom– even if that means that we spend the rest of our lives – and the lives of our children and their children and their children - living in ways that acknowledge the wrong we have done, and working towards living justly with all people.

It means telling our children the ugly stories – the ones we'd sooner forget – of slave ownership, or civil-rights marches, of separate lines for people with black skin. It means telling our children through our actions that God loves EVERYONE. That black lives matter. That our religious leaders abused and oppressed innocent indigenous children. It means learning from our mistakes and prayerfully and creatively working for healing and reconciliation.

However, forgiveness doesn't mean automatic reconciliation and healing. Healing has its own timetable and sometimes reconciliation just isn't possible. Sometimes you just have to let others go – even after we've forgiven them.

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes that withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.

If I insist on holding a grudge and wielding my anger in every interaction I have with the people who have hurt me, then I'm drinking poison, and the poison will kill me long before it does anything to my abusers.

To choose forgiveness, then, is to release ourselves from bitterness to glimpse the deep wells of God's healing heart.

In this sense, forgiveness is a reorientation – a turning away and a turning toward. Sometimes forgiveness is a practice where we put our hurt down so that we can have free hands to take up something new. Sometimes we have to do this 70x7 times – however many times it will take to pick up life.

After Charles Carl Roberts killed the Amish school-girls at Nickel Mines, their families and their church publicly forgave him. They supported his widow and her family. Why? Because Christ calls us to forgive.

YES they still grieve, YES they did not excuse him. YES they likely still daily lay down at God's feet their bitterness and grief and pain and take up reassurance and courage and strength.

Forgiveness is a process — a messy, non-linear, and often jumbled up process that can leave us feeling whole and liberated one minute, and bleeding anguish out of every pore the next.

But God is always in the business of taking the worst things that happen to us, and working on these within us for the purpose of wholeness and blessing. Because God is in our story, we can know that our wounds do not define us; that we are more than the hurt within us.

So what exactly is Jesus asking of us when he tells us to forgive each other again and again and again and again?

I believe he means that because God loves us, we don't have to forgive out of scarcity. We can forgive out of God's abundance. And we can do that 70x7 times.

Friends. In the Kingdom of God, forgiveness is extravagantly given out of a place of love – the heart of God. Yet it is not given without price. Just as we have been forgiven extravagantly, we also must forgive.

God's extravagance is not silly nor is it ignorant, nor does it overlook injustice or wrong. God's extravagant forgiving is the beginning of freedom. It doesn't give up on us and it expects transformation.

Friends. We are not perfect like God but know that we are loved. The God who has walked with us through our most painful grievous times when we have been hurt by others – this same God who walked with us through these times holds us and supports us and encourages us to give God our grudges and forgive again and again and again whether we “feel it” or not.

My prayer for us is that we will take up this hard work of forgiveness. Through forgiveness – with God's strength, may our chains that bind us be loosened and may our clenching hands be open to know the extravagance of God's blessing upon us.