

Rev. Duncan A Burns
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Proper 19-Year A -2017

You may have heard the expression, "To err is human. To forgive is divine." There is another version of this saying I came across recently. "To err is human. To forgive is darned near impossible!"

Today's Gospel reflects the line in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The King shows radical forgiveness and releases the servant from his huge debt. Later in the story the servant grabs the one who owes him a small debt by the neck and says, "Pay what you owe." When he cannot pay, he orders him thrown into prison until the debt is repaid.

Today's Gospel is a key to bringing many people from brokenness to wholeness, from error into truth, from death into life. I wish the path to God's Kingdom didn't have to make a pit stop at brokenness, but that is the world we live in. We are the people of brokenness. We are broken by our own poverty, even in the midst of great wealth. We are broken by political polarization. We are broken by religious differences. We are broken by sexual abuse. We are broken by natural disasters such as hurricanes. We are broken by racism and hate.

9/11 brought us face to face with what can happen when religious fanaticism loses sight of God's incredible grace and mercy. Fear and anger are powerful emotions that can cloud the good judgments of any of us. Many people face brokenness every day. Week after week we hear stories about greed and arrogance, about injustice and oppression, hatred and paybacks. We hear about the hurricanes in Houston, the Caribbean, and Florida. We hear about the enmity between police and the community in St. Louis. We hear about lives and property that were lost and about innocent people being hurt.

The events in Charlottesville brought us face to face once again with the KKK, Neo-Nazism, Anti-Semitists, and racism in America.

It is easy to see the need of forgiveness out there, but God asks us to forgive in here (point to own heart). To forgive all our family, friends, and neighbors seventy times seems "darned near impossible," but through God, all things are possible. The biggest need for forgiveness in my family was between my grandfather and his brother.

I have been working on my family genealogy. I knew my mother was born in Germany and that her father fled Hitler's regime in the thirties. I knew that Hitler had killed my great grandfather to gain control of the Berlin Broadcasting Company (he was the CEO). For thirty-four years my grandfather would not speak to his brother, and no one in the family was allowed to mention the war. Two years ago, I interviewed many family members who lived in Germany during World War II. My mother's cousin was 5 when she heard that her father was killed. She had to ride on a train for months to avoid the Allied Army as they approached Berlin. Her family lost their home, their company, their jobs, and their wealth. She opened a box from the basement

that was sealed just after the war. We looked through pictures and letters that had been too painful for them to open for the past seventy years. We found a picture of my Grandfather's brother (her father) posing with other German soldiers after taking Versailles.

We read a letter describing how he was later shot six times by his own men for giving guns and ammunition to the French Resistance. His wife and daughter were told by the German Government that he was dead. A French woman found him near death and nursed him back to health. He was eventually sent to a hospital in England. When he returned home to West Berlin after the war, he found out that his wife had run off with the Nazi SS officer that was responsible for his father's death.

My point is not whether his brother was good or evil, but that we must let go of our anger and hatred, and forgive those who have hurt us. After seventy years, our family is finally reconciling the hurt. When we are hurting, our first response should not be separation or against one another, but towards God. We begin the reconciliation process through prayer. We also need to reconcile by speaking the truth to one another.

The psalmist writes, "Let my cry come before you. Incline your ear to hear me." It is out of the depths of our lives that we call to God. It is through God's mercy and grace that we can pass through death and are brought to life by the mercy and grace of God. Brokenness can actually put us on the path to wholeness. In the low points of our lives we realize that we need God. We realize that there are some things that we just can't control. In the end, we can reconcile our differences by listening to one another, caring for one another, and loving one another despite our differences.

This past Monday on 9/11, 600 members of our community gathered in unity. We repeated the phrase, "We stand united in love" over and over as we heard Imams, Priests, Pastors, and Rabbis talk about God's love and forgiveness. Our parish was instrumental in getting the Huntington Men's Chorus for the event and shaping the event through Heather Kress and Mary Simon (our racial reconciliation committee).

The out of control, downward spiraling racism, violence, and hatred in the world can only be reversed if we are willing to forgive. God forgives us and asks us to forgive in return. In today's Gospel, after the servant was forgiven, he grabbed the one who owed him money by the neck and threw him in jail. One way is to strike back. If you are cut off in the parking lot, cut the next person off. If someone is mean to you, say something mean to someone else. After a while you won't even notice that you are tearing a whole in the fabric of your relationship with God. When we can't let go of the past and forgive, our lives become defined by our moments of hatred and pain.

Jesus provides another path to follow. We may give our anger, fear, and hatred up to God. Jesus said, "Come to me all ye that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you." The weight of the world, the sin of the world, was cast upon a sinless man, so that God's mercy and justice could bring our broken lives into wholeness. We are asked to identify with the one who was willing to give himself on the cross that we might have life.

On the cross, frustrated by violence against the innocent and all those who were deriding him, Jesus cries with us in the Psalms, "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?" Jesus dies, an earthquake rips open the earth, the curtain that separates us from God is torn in two and all the saints that had fallen asleep are raised from the dead. God asks us to be as gentle as lambs, but as wise as serpents. God does not take away our right to oppose evil. We feel frustration, anger, loneliness, and despair at times, but we who have been pardoned by the king for great hurts are asked to each give forgiveness to one another.

I ask you each to let go of your bitterness and forgive others, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. We are defined by the one who loves us, not by the ones we fear or the ones that hate us. When our hearts are turned from the little stings of our day, we become thankful for the wideness of God's love.

We invite the homeless to stay under our roof through the HHI program, we ask the hungry to eat with us, we provide books to needy children, we cloth the naked through our Thrift Shop, we offer living water to the thirsty by inviting others to service at St. John's, we help those in need with Grocery Store coupons through the ECW, we support the oppressed, we visit the lonely and the sick, and we bring at least a part of this broken world to wholeness.

Amen.