

Reflection: The grace we know; the forgiveness we give

David Fotheringham, 13 September 2020

High Street Uniting Church Frankston

Bible reading: Matthew 18: 21-35

Guide us, O God, by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover our peace; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

I was in a supermarket earlier this week, doing my weekly shopping, by myself, within 5km of my home. I nearly forgot to get cheese for making pizzas, which would have been disastrous, so I had to go back to the dairy aisle where there was a woman *coughing all over the eggs*. Albeit wearing a face mask. And I may have slightly exaggerated it, but then when I went through the checkout, she was a nearby self-serve checkout, *still coughing*. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm feeling pretty sensitive about these things when we're still in lockdown trying to reduce the transmission of this virus. I didn't approach the woman, and there's room for debate about what I might have said, but I did suggest to the staff that some extra diligent cleaning might be in order, and where. When I came home, I referred to that experience not once, not twice, but so often that my darling fiancée, when she came over, told me that it was time for me to let it go! I mostly have, though even retelling the story I can remember my feelings. I resented that someone should have come out like that, and potentially put me and my family at risk. In reality, though, my willingness to hold on to the grievance was not doing any good for the woman in the story – she was not affected by my feelings - but holding on to it was keeping me in a trap of resentment.

Last week's Bible reading had Jesus talking about what to do if someone sinned against you, particularly in the context of the fellowship of the church. He talks about naming and confronting the offence, directly, with support if necessary, aiming for the redemption of the offender, but also setting boundaries if the offender is unwilling to change. With a bit more time and thought, maybe there could have been something in that for my supermarket situation.

Today's passage follows straight on, with Peter asking the question about how many times to forgive his sister or brother, and Jesus giving a ridiculously high number - really saying: don't bother counting, it's not about the numbers. And then he tells a story about a man with a ridiculously large debt – a slave owing a king something like hundreds of millions of dollars. The king forgives the debt. And then somehow, astonishingly, that slave manages to forget how much he's been forgiven, and is uncompromisingly harsh in dealing with another fellow slave.

It's a bit hard to think our way into that story, but I want to acknowledge up front that different people will see different things in it, from two perspectives.

For those who have been sinned against – for those who are doing it tough - it's important to notice the connection to last week's reading, and be clear that forgiving others doesn't mean denying the reality of our hurt or failing to name the sin that has impacted us and put boundaries. Those things are important, even as the letting go of the resentment part is the direction for growth. Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story about a woman in his congregation who was struggling to support her kids,ⁱ saying to him: "Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies while he's living it up with another woman in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?" To which he answers, "I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't. It was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman. I'll like to see him out of your life emotionally as much as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting yourself." For some of us, this is the angle to hear in a discussion of why to forgive.

For others – for those who are actually pretty comfortable, for those who have much to be thankful for, this may still be a salutary story from a different perspective. Because sometimes we *do* forget how much we have been given. After all, think about that slave who owed the king the impossible debt. How do you come to owe such a thing? There are two obvious ways. Either someone has racked up a debt on your behalf, or else you yourself have been lent a whole lot from which you have benefitted. Let's assume that you've benefitted from the debt. And now you're *not* being forced to pay it back. While it is implied that the King in the story is God, we don't just have to think in terms of moral debts. The very land that we live on, that we are inclined to take for granted as being available to us, was under the custodianship of the Indigenous people long before Europeans came. There was no treaty, and a lot of bloodshed. Is there a debt owed, or do we just take our freedom here for granted? And maybe we sometimes forget that for many of us, the comfort we know comes from the community into which we were born; we are not simply self-made. But if no-one is demanding the debt from us we forget how much we've been given - maybe like the slave given hundreds of millions - and become arrogant or ungrateful. For those of us with privilege, this is a reminder of how much we are given, that our gratitude and humility should reflect.

This land, this planet, is a privilege. People may owe us because they have hurt us, or because of what we have given to them. Forgiving not only releases us, but also reflects our recognition of all we can be grateful to have received.

ⁱ Harold S. Kushner, "Letting Go of the Role of Victim", *Spirituality and Health*, Winter 1999, 34. Quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A Volume 4, *Pastoral Perspective* by Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn.