

May the Holy Spirit touch my lips, open our hearts, and transform our lives. Amen.

This morning I am going to continue the theme of discipleship we have been hearing in Epiphany. We will look at discipleship through two lenses: one much needed, the other a trap. Forgiveness and Idolatry. Our Gospel is full of provocations and that's good. Like the question we discussed at our tables just three weeks ago at the Annual Meeting. As a reminder: "...in the context of the political division in our country, how do we conduct ourselves as people of faith who are also responsible citizens?"

It is very easy to try to make things better and end up making things very much worse. Conflict and division are not new. The "hell of fire" in this passage we just heard, is a translation of the Greek word Gehenna, which refers to the burning garbage heap outside of town. In other words, if you call somebody a fool, you are calling yourself garbage. There is no we and they, there is only us, and that us is God's field, God's building, God's servants.

So, my first focus is on forgiveness. In a few minutes, I promise, we will make our communal confession and ask

for forgiveness. In the Lord's prayer, we will promise to forgive others as we have been forgiven. How do we practice forgiving others? Forgiveness is:

"...a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness."¹

Some synonyms for forgiveness help shine a light on what this forgiveness is.

pardon · absolution · exoneration · remission · dispensation · indulgence · understanding · tolerance · purgation · clemency · mercy · pity · lenience · leniency · quarter · reprieve · discharge · amnesty · delivery · acquittal · clearing · pardoning · condoning · condonation · vindication · exculpation · let-off · letting off · shrift · shriving²

In our prayer book, there is a service that I don't think is used very regularly called Reconciliation of a Penitent. It is an opportunity for an individual to lay down a burden and experience forgiveness. There is one line in that service where the penitent is asked "Do you, then, forgive those who have sinned against you?" This, after promising to turn again to Christ. That turn is a good clue for one of the necessary steps in forgiveness. Not many other steps are

¹ <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/forgiveness/definition> "What is Forgiveness?"

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/forgiveness>

laid out for us. Throughout the Gospels, we often see Jesus telling people that they are forgiven and not to sin anymore. I have been curious for months about how I am to practice forgiving, to develop the “forgiveness” muscle, have this be something I do well.

I know forgiveness does not mean that everything is okay. 30 years ago this week, Nelson Mandela was released from prison in South Africa. He had been in prison nearly my entire life. Five years later, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed, with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and other South African leaders. The TRC was set up after the end of apartheid to address the violence and torture during the decades of minority white supremacist rule. Anyone who was a victim of violence was free to make an accusation and to face their perpetrators. Perpetrators who admitted their participation could face their accusers, hear them, and tell their own testimonies. This was a crucial step for South Africa as they transitioned to a full and free democracy.³ The mandate of the commission was to bear witness to, record, and in some cases grant amnesty to the perpetrators of crimes relating to human rights violations,

³ I am grateful to the information I found on <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-trc-0>.

reparation, and rehabilitation. The commission was charged with restoring victims' dignity and formulating proposals to assist with rehabilitation. Out of over 7000 cases, almost 900 were granted amnesty.

When a victim is heard and a perpetrator is given an opportunity to make amends, cycles of violence and retribution break; the sin matrix dissolves. That is as close as I can get to an algorithm of forgiveness. It is not perfect and it does not guarantee that everything will be okay. However, if there is a release of resentment, what freedom that is!

On a smaller level, my EFM class in Colorado was once painfully divided. Most of “us” were on one side of an issue and one individual was on the other. I was new to mentoring and I was lost as to how to deal with this divide. Finally, the individual asked me if he could address the group. He had prepared on a large poster board his own “hierarchy of needs” pyramid for how to get along as companion disciples a Christian group, with disagreements. Community was the foundation of that pyramid. And he was lonely. He needed us. He needed to be heard and to hear us without being judged. Again, resentments got

released, we moved forward, and the us and them were unified as WE.

That is why I have long been intrigued by the instructions from Jesus at the start of our Gospel about leaving your gift at the altar if your brother or sister has something against you. Really. I have reflected that one sentence over and over and over many times. The altar in question here is in the Temple in Jerusalem, where worship is still centralized for the Judeans. The gift would have been an animal or birds. Most recently, a strange image has come to mind.

What if everybody listening to Jesus preach followed this instruction? What if they all traveled to Jerusalem, went to the temple, bought their animal or pair of birds, went to the altar, and then ... I have been seeing the central Temple full of sheep and birds and other animals, let loose, set free, baa-ing and chirping in the Temple while people go and do the work of reconciliation. Real discipleship means forgiving and asking for forgiveness, not whether your sheep is unblemished. What “gift” do we offer when we are really asked to give ourselves?

At one point in time, I heard that sentence as a barrier to Communion. I took this instruction literally to mean that if someone had something against me I could not go to the altar and take Communion. I fasted from Communion for a long time because there was someone who had something against me and I didn't know how to fix it. So, my last thought on forgiveness is that sometimes the release is personal and private. Sometimes the person has died and the way we heal the breach has changed dramatically.

Sometimes a relationship is so toxic that it is only more abusive to try to reconcile. In 2006, I heard Sister Helen Prejean and Miroslav Volf speaking about “the anatomy of reconciliation,” about turning from violence to healing. Volf, who grew up in Croatia, spoke about a man who had been captured and tortured in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Long after his release, this man realized that the torture was ongoing—in his mind. Volf said that the man came to see his mind as a house with different rooms and his torturer was in the living room. The violence could never be undone, but what this man could do, was move the man out of the front room to the basement in his mind. After that, this man was free.

Resentment is using memory to turn the weapon that hurt us on ourselves. According to Volf, “The proper goal of memory should be reconciliation—‘embrace’—which includes justice.” Volf proposes that the memory of Christ's passion and resurrection, which we do every week, should guide Christians’ remembering of wrongs committed and suffered.⁴ We don’t tell a story of a victim. We tell the story of the Victor. This is freedom and release and reconciliation.

I am going to give you two suggestions for practicing release and reconciliation. For the first, I want you to say the Lord’s prayer at home and to insert the name of someone for whom you need to pray because of resentment. For example—I shall pray for my grandmother who left us this week—it goes like this: “Billie’s Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Give Billie this day her daily bread, forgive Billie her trespasses, lead Billie not into temptation, deliver Billie from evil.” You get the idea. This prayer can be hard, I admit. Try it. I’m sure you can think of someone from the news if not in your daily life.

⁴ Volf, *The End of Memory*, 2006

Secondly, today, before you go to the altar, we will offer one another the peace. When we do that here at St. Ben's it is truly a love feast. Let's exercise our forgiveness "muscles." No, I am not going to put people on the spot, any more than our confession does not ask us to name particular sins. I am asking you to offer an exchange of forgiveness during the peace. Make your Yes a true Yes because when we forgive each other we are saying Yes to God.

When you turn to your sister or brother disciple at the peace this morning, say "I forgive you." or "You are forgiven." or "Peace and Forgiveness to you." There does not have to be a particular resentment. This is an opportunity to remind us of what God does for us. I will be interested to hear how that works for you.

The reason I'm suggesting this is that my second focus is idolatry. When we are consumed with resentment about somebody, that person looms larger than God. On the other side of the coin, as Paul has been telling us for a few weeks now in First Corinthians, when we elevate a person, some teacher, mentor, candidate, leader, Apollos, or Paul, out of proportion to who they really are, they also loom larger

than God. When we are free from resentment and misplaced adoration, to quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we “only have one master now...but with this ‘yes’ to God belongs just as clear a ‘no.’ Your ‘yes’ to God requires your ‘no’ to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor, to all ungodliness, and to all mockery of what is holy. Your ‘yes’ to God requires a ‘no’ to everything that tries to interfere with your serving God alone, even if that is your job, your possessions, your home, or your honor in the world.”⁵ I believe this is the real adultery Jesus was warning against: those things that tear us from love of God and neighbor.

Our conversations together in this fraught year must be framed by our Yes to God and our No to injustice. If we hit a wall of disagreement, if our brother or sister has something against us, I hope we can all root ourselves in the words of the prayers we are about to pray this morning. Let us set aside anything in us that is not God’s, for, as we prayed at the start of our service, “we can do nothing good without” God. Let us be God’s servants, God’s field, God’s building of the body of Christ. We are forgiven. Forgive one another. And bring your unique gift—your very self—to the altar and be filled with the gift Christ gives to us.

⁵ Confirmation Sermon in 1938 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.