

Love Your Neighbor: Forgiveness and Mercy **Luke 6:37-38; Matthew 5:7-8**

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Jamie Byrd was sixteen-years old when her father died. Of course, she struggled with deep grief as people do in the face of great loss, but Jamie's grief was complicated by the way in which her father met his death. "I was that sixteen-year old that was broken," she said. "I didn't know whether I should hate, whether I should forgive. I had to come to grips with that."

You see, it was 1998 and Jamie's father, a forty-nine year old African-American man named James Byrd Jr., was walking home one June night in Jasper, Texas after celebrating an anniversary with friends. Byrd and his family were well-known in the small community of Jasper, and he was often seen walking through town because he didn't have a car. That particular night, a pickup truck pulled up near him, and the driver, a local teen that Byrd knew, asked if he'd like a ride. Byrd said yes and climbed in the back. But, rather than taking him home, the driver and two of his buddies drove out in the country, badly beat Byrd, spray-painted his face, and then chained his ankles to the back of the truck and drove three miles on the back roads until Byrd was dead. Two of the men were known white supremacists.

There are some acts that feel unforgivable. Hate crimes, abuse, rape, murder, the attack on the capitol, the shooting of children and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School. And there are some people who just don't seem to deserve mercy. Yet, in the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches us "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy."

This is the last week of our sermon series entitled, "Love Your Neighbor: Here's How" in which we have been studying the Beatitudes and how they might guide us as we, the Church, help lead ourselves, our denomination, and our nation on a journey of healing. There is so much division in our world; so much acrimony. My hope is that by taking several weeks to talk about what love looks like, we might be inspired individually and as a congregation to step out of our comfort zones and into bold acts of loving and healing.

Of all the beatitudes, all of Jesus' instructions to us on how to love, none may be more challenging than to be merciful. It seems benign enough when you think of showing mercy to a close family member or friend. Yet, the challenge Jesus gives us goes far beyond those relationships. What does it look like to show mercy to those who have hurt us, those who have hurt ones we love, and those who have committed unthinkable acts?

Before we go any further, let's talk a little bit about what mercy actually means. It seems like one of those words that is hard to pin down. According to Merriam Webster dictionary, "mercy" has multiple meanings including: compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one's power, a blessing that is an act of divine favor or compassion, and compassionate treatment of those in distress.

All of these meanings can be found in scripture. In the Hebrew Bible, we see them in God's love and compassion for the people of Israel and, therefore, for us. God is compassionate when we make mistakes and blesses us despite our flaws and poor decisions. In the gospels, we

see God's love and compassion expressed through the words and actions of Jesus. We hear it in our Communion liturgy when we say, "He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners". We learn it from Jesus' teachings to his disciples: "Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you."

In our Methodist tradition, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, preached that we are most faithful on our Christian journeys when we balance works of piety - prayer, worship, scripture reading, for example - with works of mercy - helping the poor, standing up to injustice, caring for those who are hurting.

So, mercy in our lives of faith can have many meanings and be expressed in many ways. Yet, so often it seems at the core of mercy is forgiveness - God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others -and forgiveness is hard. So, that is where we will focus today.

I think all of us have wounds in the past or present which continue to fester - perhaps yours were left by an abusive or neglectful parent, a spouse who cheated, a co-worker who took the praise for work you had done, a child who left and never came back. Or perhaps you carry the wounds of a whole people. The pain of Native Americans still living out the consequences of Europeans settling in this country, driving them from their land, slaughtering their family members, and forcing them to live on reservations with little support and less opportunity. Or you are an African-American living with not only the horrible specter of slavery but also with centuries of racism. Whatever your story, you may be like Jamie Byrd, not knowing whether to hate or forgive.

Yet, "blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy". We carry these deep wounds yet our faith leads us to ask ourselves how and if and when we can forgive.

A few years ago, Archbishop Desmond Tutu teamed up with his daughter, an Episcopal priest, to try to spark a forgiveness revolution. Throughout his childhood, the Archbishop watched as his father physically and verbally abused his mother leaving him with memories and scars he carried with him into adulthood. Then, as an adult, his activism and opposition to Apartheid led to death threats and arrests. He had every reason to sit with his anger and his pain, to allow those wounds to fester. Yet, instead, he headed South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission whose aim was to bring healing to victims and perpetrators, largely through the power of forgiveness.

In 2014, he came to the conclusion that forgiveness is what can make us whole and he and his daughter began teaching people how to forgive by writing "The Book of Forgiveness: The Fourfold Path For Healing Ourselves And Our World". So, as we focus on mercy today, I'd like to share their fourfold path with you.

The first step on the path is to tell the story, to share an honest and complete account of what happened - first with someone you trust and then, perhaps, with the person who hurt you. Many of us remember the stories told at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission - stories of people disappearing and brutal beatings - shared as the perpetrators listened and often wept. Simply telling the story is healing in and of itself.

The second step is to name the hurt. This goes beyond the events themselves to naming the feelings - fear, anger, betrayal, shock - whatever your feelings were at the time of the incident and what you feel now. Yet, we can't stop with naming. We also need to work on understanding what those feelings have meant for how we live our lives. If you are African-American, has the death of George Floyd led you to always feel afraid when you see a police car? How has that changed your behavior? Your parenting? Your future?

The third step is granting forgiveness. You may have noticed I haven't said much about those who cause such hurt and their role in this process. Ideally, of course, perpetrators hear the story of what happened and acknowledge the deep pain they have caused. Yet, the Archbishop points out that it is unfair to the victim for forgiveness to hang on the perpetrator showing up or asking for forgiveness. That passive role leaves the victim stuck and unable to move forward. That is why victims need to be active in forgiving - to reclaim their power and self-worth to such an extent that they can see themselves as heroes in their stories. They can see and appreciate their own strength. Forgiveness is ultimately about a change in the victim that isn't dependent on the apology of the perpetrator.

The final step in this fourfold process is renewing or releasing the relationship. As the person or people who have been hurt, you have the right to decide whether to continue your relationships with those who have hurt you. If you decide that is important to you, then you begin the work of reconciliation. If not, you let go of the relationship, understanding that releasing this relationship is in no way a failure.

These four steps are not sequential. Like the phases of grief, you may move from one to another and back again as your life and growth nudge you along the journey over a long period of time. Yet, the Tutus emphasize that forgiveness is a choice and an act of empowerment - an opportunity to free oneself.

Here are a few things that they say forgiveness is not.

- Forgiveness is not easy—it requires hard work and a consistent willingness.
- Forgiveness is not weakness—it requires courage and strength.
- Forgiveness does not subvert justice—it creates space for justice to be enacted with a purity of purpose that does not include revenge.
- Forgiveness is not forgetting—it requires a fearless remembering of hurt.
- Forgiveness is not quick—it can take several journeys through the cycles of remembering and grief before one can truly forgive and be free.

As we look at our own wounds and the wounds in our denomination and our country, there is so much healing to be done. We will be called to be merciful. How might we use this fourfold path to lead ourselves and others toward healing? Might we find the courage to tell our own stories? Might we make a space for our LGBTQ siblings to tell their stories of how the Christian church has hurt them? Might we listen openly and compassionately as our African-American and Native American siblings share their pain and anger and acknowledge our own power and privilege?

Somehow, the family of James Byrd Jr. has found their way along this fourfold path. His son, Ross Byrd, fought to stop the execution of two of his father's murders, citing his Christian faith as the reason for his mercy. James Byrd's sisters began The Byrd Center for Racial Healing

to educate the public on cultural diversity and heighten awareness of the consequences of racial hatred, hopefully reducing the number of racially-motivated crimes. And Jamie, Byrd's sixteen year-old daughter who didn't know whether to hate or forgive... Jamie Byrd is now a ten-year veteran law enforcement officer with the Houston Police Department. On June 20th 2020, she was out protesting the death of George Floyd, seeing it as her opportunity to use her voice to speak out against police violence and racial profiling.

May we all find such courage and mercy to forgive but not forget. Amen.