



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

August 26, 2018

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Ephesians 4:25-5:2; 2 Samuel 18:5-15, 31-33

*Forgiveness: Set Free in Love to Live*

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The Game of Thrones narrative continues for King David. One son Amnon rapes his half-sister Tamar, then kicks her out. Another son, Absalom, quiets her in his house while he nurses anger and vengeance, cunningly acting like nothing is wrong. David finds out, but does nothing, because Amnon is his eldest and he loves him. Absalom throws a feast to get Amnon drunk. Absalom's servants murder him. Rumors escalate. In chaos of fear, anxiety, false accusations everyone flees. David mourns. Joab, David's loyal right-hand general, tries to reconcile them. Absalom comes home. Then for years he conspires to usurp the throne. Armed rebellion, civil war, years of fiery rivalry and festering revenge reaches a battle climax—Absalom with the “men of Israel” versus loyal “servants of David.” Hear what the Spirit may say to us. {Read 2 Samuel 18:5-15, 21, 31-33}

Despite dramatic extremes in scripture, I believe at heart people are loving. At best, we seek what's good. And we don't always think and act that way. Desires get twisted. Intentions get corrupted. We hurt other people. We exploit community. We abuse creation. Sin abounds. Consequences can be painfully steep or deep.

One day this week, I'd just entered on I-94, when a Volkswagen Jetta zoomed up and cut in front of me as we passed under Oakland Drive. On the ramp to the right an officer jumped in. Door slammed. Engine zoomed. Lights flashed.

Consequences! I didn't take pleasure in it, exactly. As I passed them pulled over moments later on the Westnedge ramp, it cautioned me to be on my best behavior.

(Which, I confess, I am not always! What about you?! Promise I won't call the police ... anyone ever been speeding or parking illegally, gotten a ticket or not? Maybe driving habits should be in our prayer of confession sometime!) On that day this week, I also had a choice. To go down the road of fueling rage, or vengeful glee at one driver's punishment. Or keep watching warily, driving defensively, letting it all go, making my way to church.

On his way through the forest, Joab couldn't just let it all go. He's David's loyal right-hand man. Has been for decades. Watching out, faithfully seeking what's best for David even when he does evil, when he's most vulnerable. He wants what is best for David and the nation. But when David urges "deal gently / mercifully with the young man", Joab cannot forgive. Spear thrusts of pent up anger, bitterness, hate.

Absalom was hanging between heaven and earth. One of those great poetic phrases in Hebrew that translation can't capture fully. Beyond physical, it's an emotional, spiritual, life in the balance kind of moment. He's hanging by his head, possibly literally his hair ... the very attribute that just paragraphs ago described his great attractiveness. Now there he is left swaying, in the balance of gentle breezes or stormy gusts of human emotion, decision, action.

Here's a question the text poses for us today: how do we balance consequences with mercy / forgiveness? And when existence hangs in the balance for all of us—our hope, our sanity, our relationships, our decisions—what will lead to new life, to resurrection versus what will lead to death?

Maybe David doesn't deal more harshly with that "young man" Absalom (as with Amnon and others), because he's become a naïve, weak, and foolish sucker. Maybe Joab eliminates Absalom (despite David's emotional appeal) because he thinks it's the only way to end this threat to David. Loyal he wants to protect his friend and

king. Or maybe Joab is simply nursing a deep-seeded, well-fed grudge, continuing incessant cycles of violence. In the end, David is clearly hurt even more by Absalom's death, crying out that he would have given his very life in place of his son's. David grieved over Saul, Jonathan, and an unnamed child. Then the one previously called the "young man" becomes again "my son," repeated five times. It's pathos deeper than anything else in scripture; perhaps except Jesus crying out from the cross.

Friends, I've tried to think about how opening our hearts to grief helps forgiveness, as opposed to anger and vengeance. It's far from clear to me. But this bit is, from years of life shared together and trying to understand my own. Anger, bitterness, hate we carry continues to hurt us, burn us, bind us, confine us, twist us, take life from us, and from others around us, radiating as we react or speak or expect something hurtful ... breaking, shattering other lives like our third-floor window on our bulletin cover. Truth is many more people were caught between heaven and hell, in that moment when Absalom hung in a tree. And so, it all continues ... until we let it go. Until, in God's grace, we release it. And forgiveness sets us free.

I think I remember a joke about a married couple. I think it was a Jewish joke – so let's call them Moses and Miriam. Moses does something wrong, Miriam lays into him. Moses apologizes. They make up. But once in a while, when things get a little testy, Miriam brings it up again. Finally, Moses says, "Oi (or some Jewish phrase)! Why do you keep coming back to that? I thought you said 'forgive and forget.'" "Right," Miriam answers. "I just don't want you to forget that I've forgiven and forgotten!"

Actually I don't think forgiveness is the same as forgetting. Sometimes past hurts do slip from conscious memory. That can be a gift. But forgetting is not really the intent of forgiveness. In fact, sometimes it can be good to remember—in a spirit of

grace not anger—both to prevent something wrong from happening again, and to honor life as it is ... sometimes actually deeper and richer through the process of healing hurts.

I'm moved by Kim Phuc's story for *This I Believe*. Maybe you've heard me refer to her before. On June 8, 1972, Kim ran out of the Buddhist temple in her Vietnamese village to see an airplane flying low, drop four bombs. Then walls of fire everywhere around, over her body, clothes burned, skin scarred. "I was nine years old," she writes, "but I still remember my thoughts at that moment: I would be ugly and people would treat me in a different way. My picture was taken [there] on Road 1 from Saigon to Phnom Penh. After a soldier gave me some drink and poured water over my body, I lost consciousness."

Several days later, she woke up in the hospital where she endured seventeen operations in fourteen months. Through pain, itching and headaches she dreamt of being a doctor. But the government didn't let her go to school. They wanted her seen as a symbol. "Anger inside me was like hatred as high as a mountain," Kim says. "I hated my life. I hated all people who were normal ... I really wanted to die many times. I spent my daytime in the library to read a lot of religious books to find a purpose for my life. I read the Holy Bible. On Christmas 1982, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior. It was an amazing turning point in my life. God helped me learn to forgive—the most difficult of all lessons. It didn't happen in a day and it wasn't easy. But I finally got it."<sup>i</sup>

Friends, dramatic extremes of scripture and world history parallel what's real in our personal lives. What Kim Phuc faced resembles roads of life we're on every day. That's why in wedding preparation, we address forgiveness. I ask each couple to read a short article by Miroslav Volf, about how self-giving love defines married life. That includes anticipating injuries, he says, as much as joy. "In an old Jewish

story, God decided to create the world, then foresaw all the sin that human behavior would commit against God and each other. The only way God could continue was to decide to forgive the world before creating it.” A commitment to forgive comes before creation, as before marriage vows<sup>ii</sup> ... and I daresay before we get out of bed and get dressed every day.

Jesus conveys what that holy unconditional, forgiving love from before creation looks like for us. That’s the symbol of the cross. Like a mother who will won’t forsake a nursing child, and a father who runs to welcome a wayward child home. Jesus lived that love in the face of twisted rules and prejudice in society, corrupt people in positions of power. He felt flames of anger, false accusations, malice, that didn’t scorch his skin, but nailed him to a tree, hanging between heaven and earth. There, embodying great faithfulness of Divine Love, amid deep pathos he prayed: God forgive them; they know not what they do. Friends, here’s the great resurrection promise for us. The sacred grace that made Christ come alive and set free his closest companions from locked room of fear and despair; that same sacred grace frees us from powers, experiences, incessant cycles of death, to raise up new life among us!

In that spirit of forgiveness and resurrection, perfect love casts out all fear. We end vengeful retaliation. We soften resentment. We stifle cutting retorts. We love our enemies, as Jesus urged, changing contention to compassion. We share kind words. Out of our healing and increasing peace, we hope and work for the healing of others. We’re willing to give deeply of ourselves to help others get better.

But let’s be clear. Forgiveness does not mean we keep accepting harmful behavior, even from others we’ve tried to love dearly. That’s what she called distraught to discuss a couple of days ago. Her son, about to show up on her doorstep. Should she lock the doors, call police? Friends, forgiveness is not license for further abuse.

Quite the opposite. We name what's wrong, we speak truth and seek strength to pursue what's good and life-giving, not what hurts ... as the first step toward being set free. And if seeking fullness of peace together is not mutual, we need not press it. Forgiveness can still arise and flow from our heart. But actual contact doesn't need to occur until someone else is ready to reciprocate. Still, we watch warily, drive defensively, and try to let it all go—among many incidents every day—as we make our way to the heavenly realm God intends for us here on earth.

Friends, we don't forgive because someone earns it, pays consequences, proves repentance, guarantees never again. *Forgiveness is an unmerited gift.* We don't forgive because we shouldn't feel angry. A moral right to anger can be important to claim. Still we forgive, we try not to let the sun go down on our anger, *because of the ongoing harm holding on can cause us.* We forgive, ultimately not to change a person who harmed us, *rather to be transformed ourselves.* We forgive—often not in a day or easily, but consistently—because in the course of imperfect lives we see *the only possible way to live with gratitude, generosity, joy, and the peace God wants for us, is to receive sacred grace and pass it on.* To be imitators of God, living, forgiving, as Christ loved us. And then shattered pieces of life begin to repair and vision for the future becomes clearer again.

One final bit of inspiration for us all, from Jennifer Thompson-Cannino and Ronald Cotton. Jennifer picked out Ronald as the man who raped her. She prayed every day for 11 years that he would die. Then she found out she was wrong; and found it impossible to forgive herself.

Ronald reflects: “Forgiving Jennifer ... took less time than people think. I knew she was a victim, hurting real bad. I was hurting, too. I missed my family, my girlfriend, my freedom. But I knew who I was ... not that monster. I knew who did this to Jennifer, and he would have gone to his grave leaving me to rot in prison without

ever confessing to what he had done. Letting go of my anger toward him was hard, but staying free in my heart was a choice only I could make.”

“I asked Ron if he could ever forgive me,” Jennifer continues. “And with all the mercy in the world he took my hands and with tears in his eyes, he told me he had forgiven me a long time ago. At that moment I began to heal. Ronald taught me how to let go of all that pain; his forgiveness set me free that night. Without Ronald, I would still be shackled to that moment in time, and it would own me forever. I soon discovered that I could even forgive the man who had raped me — not because he asked me to, nor because he deserved it — but because I did not want to be a prisoner of my own hatred.”

They remain friends, victims of the same injustice, able to help each other heal, speaking about judicial reform, living with their families in North Carolina. Ronald concludes, “I could choose to be bitter; I could hate the prison guards and the system. But I choose to forgive them all, so that I stay free and not be a prisoner for the rest of my life.”<sup>iii</sup>

A Volkswagen zoomed past and cut in, consequences hung in the balance as an officer pulled it over. Absalom hung in a tree, life in the balance for so many beyond himself when Joab arrived on that road. So it is for our families, our friendships, our work colleagues, our country along roads we travel each day. Kim Phuc got caught on the wrong road at the wrong time in the cruelty of human existence. Life for her hung in the balance when a soldier met her, gave her water, and carried her to salvation. She became known throughout the world from that provocative picture of the Vietnam War. She went on to live in Canada and work to aid children who are war victims. “Forgiveness made me free from hatred,” she insists. “I still have many scars on my body and severe pain most days, but my heart is cleansed. Napalm is very powerful, but faith, forgiveness, and love are much

more powerful. We would not have war at all if everyone could learn to live with true love, hope, forgiveness. If that little girl in the picture can do it, ask yourself: can you?"<sup>iv</sup>

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> quoted and abridged from Kim Phuc, "The Long Road to Forgiveness" in *This I Believe II* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008), 179-181.

<sup>ii</sup> Miroslav Volf, "Married Love" in *Christian Century*, June 5-12, 2002, p. 35.

<sup>iii</sup> Ronald Cotton and Jennifer Thompson-Cannino,  
<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101469307>

<sup>iv</sup> Phuc, 179-181.