

SLD03.07.10 Third Lent
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 18:21-35
I Samuel 18:6-11
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Breaking Free from Resentment and Bitterness”

As I tackle these unpleasant Lenten topics, blame and shame, anxiety and worry, resentment and bitterness, what I notice is that my interest shifts more and more away from what it takes to eradicate or resolve them (as if I could) in favor of simply naming their presence and power in our lives. And not just in our lives, but, if the Bible is any witness, in the lives of human beings from the very beginning.

Starting with Genesis, scripture abounds with tales of resentment and bitterness and their consequences – Cain’s jealousy of Abel; Esau’s bitterness at Jacob’s trickery; Joseph’s brothers’ revenge on his endless grandstanding; Jesus’ disciples disdain for the sons of Zebedee, Martha’s fussiness over Mary’s choices; the older brother’s resentment of the Ritz being put on for his useless younger sibling, and many, many others, including the torturous tale of Saul and David’s acrimonious relationship, of which we just heard a snippet, which may be the best story of all to reveal the consequences of chronic, festering, unresolved bitterness.

You see, this is not so much a sermon about the merits of forgiveness as it is about the consequences of resentment. We already know that forgiveness is desirable, that we’re supposed to offer it, that God is forever forgiving us, and that we disciples of Jesus Christ are expected eventually to get around to offering forgiveness to whoever hurts, betrays, or pisses us off. And, as today’s first text reminds us, not just

once, but *ad nauseum*, which is what seven-seven times *really* means – news that is no more welcome to us than it was to Peter.

SO unwelcome is that news, in fact, that my one contrarian sermon about forgiveness a couple years ago mostly focuses on how hard it is to forgive, and how important it is not to forgive too soon, which is not exactly the thrust of today's first text. No, in the parable of the unforgiving servant, what Jesus seems mostly to want to drive home is the consequences to the dirtwad who *refuses* to forgive: he gets handed over to be tortured until his debt is paid. His debt to whom? To his employer, his Master, to the one who had just so generously forgiven him.

In case of his disciples might miss the point, Jesus adds, "and so my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

You might call it Jesus' "stick" verses "carrot" approach to forgiveness. The carrot is that because God generously and readily forgives us, we are enabled then generously and readily to forgive others. The stick is, beware the consequences of not forgiving.

The carrot is what Methodists call "prevenient grace" – God loving us first. God so loved the world that God gave the only Son. God so loves us that we should love our God, our neighbors, our enemies and anybody else that wanders across our path. The stick is, if you don't forgive, you're gonna pay. Big time. And you're not going to like it.

In "The Mystery of Forgiveness," Wayne Teasdale writes about the carrot, that the capacity to forgive is one of the infallible signs of Christian maturity. ... the proof that

we are growing in virtue and wisdom.¹ In the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus addresses the stick: if we don't forgive, we'll be tortured.

So, following Jesus' lead, we'll look less today at the nobility, joy and goodness of forgiveness than at the torturous consequences of refusing to forgive. Never mind that to forgive is divine or that the one we resent deserves torture a whole more than we do. What we're interested in today is less what happens to the perp than what happens to *us* when we don't, or can't, or won't, forgive from our hearts.

This sermon is about the stick.

And to examine that stick more closely, what better story than the chronically miserable relationship between Saul and David.

Here you've got a king and you've got a kid. And a scary giant. The king's scared of the giant, the kid says he'll whup him, the king says "no way," the kid says "way," the king puts his own armor on the boy, and what do you know but that he proceeds to whoop the giant. This is the story we all know of David and Goliath.

So it's all good, right? The kid won, the giant's dead, the king's safe. What else could you want?

Well, the center of attention, for one thing. You could want to be the center of attention. If you're the king, see, you're kind of used to that and it doesn't feel so good to watch everybody's fawning over somebody else. When all the women go singing and dancing and carrying on around David and saying stuff like, "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his *ten* thousands," this does not go down well at all for Saul, who commences to eye David from a slightly different perspective.

¹ Wayne Teasdale, "The Mystery of Forgiveness," quoted in *The Breviary*, Vol 1. p.

I mean, he's grateful to him and all but, not being keen on sharing the attention, Saul mostly just wants David dead. So he chucks his spear at him a couple of times.

David, being young and quick, eludes the weapons, and, apparently not one to take spear-chucking personally, agrees to marry Saul's daughter, Michal. What Saul secretly has in mind, though, is to get David killed during his efforts to win the girl's hand. Which is why the marriage gift Saul asks for is a mere one hundred Philistine foreskins.

Now I don't know if David thought maybe those Philistines were going to give up their foreskins voluntarily or that they wouldn't be all that hard to slice, or whether he was just too giddy to care, but like a pliable puppy dog, he bounces off to battle and fetches the foreskins, no worries. Though this wins him a wife, it does not, of course, endear him any further to Saul, who promptly cooks up another scheme to eliminate his existence on this earth..

Are you getting the picture? Here David's just boogying through life being David, while Saul's organizing his whole life around getting rid of the guy.

Saul tries to get his son, Jonathan, to collude with him. But Jonathan likes David more than he likes Saul so he both argues with his dad about his pernicious plan, and forewarns David. Taking his point, Saul swears off trying to kill David any more, but darn it, the kid just gets under his skin so much that one day when David's playing the lyre, Saul just can't help himself from chucking his spear at him again.

Anybody ever gotten under your skin like that?

Yet again, David escapes. Saul sends a posse but no good, David gets away again. Saul sends *more* men. And *more*. Finally goes himself. See what's going on?

How Saul's bitterness is getting the best of him? I mean, he's a king with a country to run and borderlines to defend and widows and orphans to feed. What's he doing gallivanting all over the countryside trying to snuff out this pesky pipsqueak?

Nevertheless, for a few more chapters of I Samuel, Saul keeps pursuing and laying traps for David, and David keeps eluding them. Sometimes David outwits the king, sometimes Jonathan intervenes. Others join the drama. Many get killed, mostly by Saul, who's now suspecting conspiracy. Once, in frustration, he even throws a spear at his own son.

I know it's an extreme case, and that even before David happened along, Saul was likely one sandal short of a pair. But can you see how he's organized his attention, his actions, his *life* around his bitterness and loathing of David? And so I ask you, who's the one suffering here? Who's being tortured?

For another eight or nine chapters this relentless macabre dance between David and Saul goes on, their relationship becoming more and more complex, more and more torturous, at least for Saul.

It's not as if they don't love each other; they do! They just drive each other crazy. At least David drives Saul even crazier than he already was. For his part, David doesn't seem all that perturbed as he runs around saving cities and fighting Philistines and marrying attractive women. He just pauses now and again to play cat and mouse with Saul.

Oh, once in a while David really does feel genuinely threatened by the King, and he definitely has an eye on his back. But it's as if most of the drama of Saul's obsessive behavior is taking place on a separate stage. While Saul is slowly being destroyed by

his bitterness, to David, the whole affair seems almost a game; a dangerous game, perhaps, but also an exciting and energizing one in which David repeatedly one-ups Saul, and Saul repeatedly falls prey to his own resentment.

Who is the one paying the consequences? Because Saul cannot forgive David whatever wrong he imagines him to have done, King Saul – handsome, God-chosen, Samuel-anointed, King of Israel Saul, tortures himself for the entire miserable latter half of his life.

And David didn't even wrong Saul! Or did he? Or does it even matter?

Let's take a more clear cut case of indisputable wrong. Those of you who read it, remember the heartbreaking beginning of William Young's novel, The Shack?² The little girl who is mercilessly raped and murdered? Is there any question whatsoever about the wrongness of that act? Any question but that her father has every right to be wild-eyed with bitterness and fury?

"How can I ever forgive that s.o.b. who killed my Missy?" the father demands of Papa, which is what he calls the person of God he's addressing. "If he were here today, I don't know what I would do. I know it isn't right, but I want him to hurt like he hurt me...if I can't get justice, I still want revenge."

Says Papa: "Mack, for you to forgive this man is for you to release him to me and allow me to redeem him."

"Redeem him?! I don't want you to redeem him. I want you to hurt him, to punish him, to put him in hell.... "(Surely you don't expect me just to forget what he did!)

² William P. Young, The Shack, Windblown Media, Newbury Park, California, 2007, pp. 224-225, 227.

“Forgiveness isn’t about forgetting,” says Papa. “It’s about letting go of another person’s throat.”

“...I don’t think I can do that,” says Mack.

“I want you to,” says Papa. “...and first of all for you, ...to release you from something that will eat you alive.”

“So it’s all right if I’m still angry?”

“Absolutely! What that man did was terrible. He caused incredible pain to many. But don’t let the anger and pain and loss you feel prevent you from...removing your hands from around his neck.”

Okay, so maybe you and I hardly ever chuck spears or obsessively hunt people down to kill them. But who of us has *not* gotten overwhelmed by, stuck in, or lost amid feelings of resentment and bitterness? Maybe not enough to seek revenge, but certainly enough to *think* it. Maybe not enough to *cause* ill to another person, but certainly enough to *wish* it. Maybe not enough to run them out of town, or church, but certainly enough to judge, condemn or otherwise dismiss them.

Catholic theologian Richard McBrien writes that “to be open to the Spirit is to accept explicitly both who we are *and* who we’re called to become, and to direct our lives accordingly.³ During this season of reflection, you and I are daring to reflect together about these nasty, niggly, life-sucking, freedom-stealing jailers of the soul that wrest so much of our attention, deprive us of grace, and negatively shape so much of who and how we are.

³ Richard P. McBrien *Catholicism: Study Edition*, p. 1057, (14) quoted in *The Breviary, The Liturgy of the Hours with Inclusive Language*. Vol 1. p. 405.

When we hang on to resentment, when we *can't* forgive, Jesus says, we are handed over to be tortured, made prisoner to something that can eat us alive. Never mind what's fair or who's at fault or how things should have gone, what's at stake when we carry and nurture feelings of bitterness and resentment is freedom of spirit, the freedom of *our* spirit. Forget the wrong-doer; the prison of resentment represents slavery for the *wronged*. In fact, a heart encased in resentment becomes twice-wronged – first by the wrongdoer and then by herself.

In our Lenten devotionals this year, Henri Nouwen remarks that God has made us God's people by calling us out of ...the desert to the fertile ground, out of slavery to freedom, out of our sin to salvation, out of captivity to liberation. ...God alone is the source of our new life together," he says.(p. 13)

Forgiveness, then, is a survival skill given by God to guide us through a wilderness of bitterness and resentment toward healing and growth.⁴ Not just something we do for someone else, but something we do for ourselves, with the help of the healing light of Jesus Christ. For what else can break us free from these hard, cold, heavy stack of somber stones in our hearts?

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁴ *Forgiveness Therapy*, David W. Schell, Abbey Press, St. Meinrad, In. 1993, p. 35.