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St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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The Solid Rock of Forgiveness

Pardon me if this opening story is two and a half weeks old, but I wrote this sermon before taking some time off. Three weeks ago, Jacob Blake was shot by police in Kenosha, WI. As I read through the reports and the responses, two things stood out in stark contrast. On the one hand is the attitude of a man and his family who survived the police shooting, who was more concerned with how his family was handling this situation than himself, even though he may never walk again. With his attitude stand the protests, family members who calmly stood up and gave expression to anger, exhaustion and calls for change.

Jacob's father prayed before microphones in a language I did not understand. He went on to say with deep feeling, "They shot my son seven times – seven times, like he didn't matter, but my son matters. He's a human being and he matters." In the face of their pain and distress, they also voiced a clear commitment to non-violence on their part and for their sakes.

"As I was riding through here, through this city, I noticed a lot of damage that doesn't reflect my son or my family," said Julia Jackson, Blake's mother. "If Jacob knew what was going on as far as that goes, the violence and the destruction, he would be very displeased." Angry and tired, and calling for reform, they still did it peacefully, with a view toward reconciliation and justice, not retribution and revenge.

On the other hand, the city erupted in violence, as we know, as what started out as peaceful protests quickly degenerated into violence, and in the end it turned deadly. An overnight shooting left two people dead and one person injured. The shooter seems to have been an un-deputized white civilian. Whoever incited the original violence, incited at the same time a counter-response that was violent.

Jacob Blake became a flashpoint for old conflicts and unresolved resentments. All of a sudden Jacob Blake as a human being was lost in the fray. Perhaps if he had not been, things might have been different. For me the incident once again becomes a study in how one chooses to respond to violence. One can stand up for what one believes and speak one's truth peacefully, yet forcefully, calling for change, and one can take to the streets and throw things at the police, taking the whole community down in a cycle of violence answering violence. One path leads to forgiveness and reconciliation; the other spirals into chaos and destruction. One chooses life; the other chooses death.

This lesson is so clearly shown in the Gospel lesson for today. "How many times shall I forgive my brother?" "Jesus, just give us a number and I know how many times I have to control my real desires for revenge before unleashing them. I'll check off the boxes, biding my time, and then when I am justified, I will vent my pent-up spleen."

70 times 7. Do the math if you want: 490. I am sure I have offered forgiveness 490 times in my life, but not to the same person, but of course, that is not the point. If one is counting, one is not offering forgiveness, but just a grace period. Forgiveness is forgiveness, not suspension of revenge.

Forgiveness always seeks appropriate and healthy community, not self-justification and revenge. Forgiveness takes the larger view, not the small, ego-centered one. Jesus' parable, distressing as it is, illustrates the point perfectly. After reading it, I want to take the unjust servant and knock his head against a very hard object! “Numbskull! If you had forgiven you would have your job. If you would have forgiven you would be out of debt. If you had forgiven, you would still be providing for your family. If you had forgiven you would not be in jail. If you had forgiven you would still have a friend. And now you've lost it all. Whatever got into you?”

The stakes are stark:

- Choose forgiveness—choose life.
- Choose revenge—choose death.
- Choose love, choose life.
- Choose ego, choose death.

Forgiveness is a bit of kindly paradox. Forgiving is the kindest thing you can do for yourself. It lets your spirit lay down a burden you were never created to bear. It frees your mind and your heart for love and service. It keeps people from living in your head rent-free. But to truly forgive you must think of the other person. You must not forget the wrong—that is unwise, for it side-steps the wisdom available to you through the experience. You must name it frankly and truthfully, just like Jacob's sister did—and Joseph in the Old Testament reading today. Forgiveness is not forgetting, but it is choosing to allow for the rebuilding of trust; appropriate trust, mutual trust, and truthful trust. No wonder the whole Cross and Resurrection thing is finally about forgiveness. It builds a bridge of kindness between two people after an offense. Forgiveness is the first step toward restoring community to its healthy, life-giving potential.

Three weeks ago, I told you that what the world needs is rock. Hewn from the Rock of Christ, the Church needs to be the church in the world, living God's redeeming, self-giving love. Forgiveness is of the essence of that rock. Having found forgiveness at the foot of the Cross, we are a people of forgiveness in the world.

Forgiveness is something that must begin with the individual believer.

- Where do I need to grant forgiveness?
- Where are offenses of others eating at me, stealing my peace and disrupting my prayer?
- Where am I feeling infringed upon, put upon, abused, neglected or ignored?
- Conversely, where do I need to seek forgiveness?
- Can I put myself in another's shoes for a second and look back at myself through their eyes?

Spouse,

Child,
 Friend,
 Neighbor,
 Political opponent?

I may be able to justify my actions, but that exercise is so quickly self-referential. Of course it looks justifiable from where I stand, but if I put myself in their shoes my justifications sound a bit like excuses. (I'm not talking about doing the right thing by another even though it hurts. That needs no forgiveness, unless we are just misguided as to what is right. Our confidence in those situations is strong when it works more against ourselves than the other.)

We pray weekly, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us," or as the New Zealand Prayer Book puts it, "In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us." Joseph is a shining example in the first lesson today.

If forgiveness starts with the individual, it becomes something that we must foster in society. Here is one way we are a rock in the world. Sometimes we are a rock on which people stumble and a stone over which they fall, or maybe just a pebble in the shoe, but a rock, nonetheless, calling for a deeper understanding of what is at stake; calling for paths toward reconciliation rather than the downward spiral of violence. To do so we must be willing to speak the truth. One people's actions don't often look oppressive or abusive until one stands in the shoes of another. When justifications too often look like excuses, the fabric of trust underling society is in danger of being torn asunder. We must admit that we have not always listened to the whole truth, and we must make room for it to be spoken. But we must not be tempted into easy quick answers that only reverse the abuse, opt for restoration without reconciliation, or simplify it into white redemption. We must work for paths that look through the brutal truths to the possibilities beyond them. We must find the humble wisdom in the situations we face as a nation so we can build common ground where trust can be built on a solid foundation.

Every Sunday we say we believe that God is healing and restoring the world and that we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration. This is what the Cross does. This is what the Church does. Let us forgive, seek forgiveness, and work for a spirit of forgiveness in our land.

Meditation questions:

- How has forgiveness or lack of it affected your life?
- Where does it need work, in one direction or another?
- How is St. Paul's building toward forgiveness in society?
- What else might we consider doing?