

Pentecost 14, Proper 19
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

September 14, 2014
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The Gift of Freedom

A man walked along a lonely road long before the days of automobiles. He noticed a very tall man walking toward him. On his shoulders sat a boy. The boy struggled to keep his arms wrapped around a cloth sack. The sack seemed to be quite heavy, and it was all he could do not to drop the whole thing. The two traveling parties stopped to visit and rest. The big man put the boy down, who carefully kept his death-grip on his sack. The first traveler, out of polite curiosity, asked about the boy's load.

“These are my treasures,” replied the boy. “Here, take a look.”

The man looked into the sack and there were rocks of all sizes. They were not pretty rocks. There were no gems or polished crystals here, just brown and black rocks. Some of them had dirt clinging to them; others had worse stuff.

“I don't understand,” said the man. “All I see are ugly rocks. How are these your treasures?”

“You do not understand,” replied the boy. He began to pull them out of the sack one by one. “This one is the time my younger brother stole my half of the only cookie in the house. This one here is when my mother promised me a bedtime story and then she forgot. And this one is when my father punished me for my sister's misdoing and wouldn't listen to my explanations. Here is one from the neighborhood boy who threw a rock at me and barely missed me. And here is the prize of them all: This one is when my teacher at school gave us all a test. It was a hard test, and I sat directly behind the smartest girl in the class. I looked up to ask for help from the teacher, but she, thinking I was trying to look at the girl's paper, took my test paper away, marked it with a failing grade and sent me home in shame.”

“And why,” asked the man, “are you carried by your large friend here?”

“You see, I was just like this boy once,” replied the big man. “I carried hurts and resentments around with me as well. One time in frustration at a small insult I killed a man. Now I bear this boy around wherever he wants to go. It is my way of doing penance for my misdeed.”

The first traveler threw back his hood, and instantly the giant and the boy recognized

their parish priest. The priest, being a kind and wise man, told them. “Do not be afraid. As priest in the village people talk with me. They tell me what they cannot tell others.”

To the boy he said, “Let me tell you some stories. First of all, your brother, remorseful at his cruelty to you, brought your half of the cookie to me and I gave it to a starving man. Your mother did not read you a bedtime story because she was overcome with pity for your neighbor who lay desperately ill—she spent the evening nursing her, and to make amends with you she baked you cookies. Your father punished you wrongly, yes, but when your sister saw it she confessed and was also punished. Your neighbor's stone frightened a large poisonous snake that was directly behind you. And your teacher took your paper because she thought you were cheating, yes, but in doing so she noticed that you had the answers written on the back of your hand! Why do you carry your resentments around unnecessarily?”

“And you, gentle giant, the man you killed certainly died unjustly at your hand, but he was intending to go to his neighbor's house that evening and kill the whole family for the sake of gold he thought they had hidden there—that they do not have. You have no need to bear this little one around any longer.”

How many times are we like the boy and the giant? Like the boy, we carry around a load of hurts and resentments. They are a sack of rocks, precious only to us, they document all the ways others have hurt us. They are a heavy load, but we hardly notice, as we struggle to keep our hearts wrapped around them, yet they keep our emotional energy taxed to the fullest. Like the giant, we carry around our remorse. We endlessly seek to do penance for our own misdeeds, never quite feeling forgiven. (And we wonder why we're tired all the time!)

Like the parish priest, today's readings give us two bits of wisdom. Peter asks Jesus how many times it is required to forgive. If your brother just keeps up the abuse, there's got to be a time when you put your foot down. Seven sounds like a good theological number, Jesus—how about 7 times, and then I put him in his place? Jesus does not answer the corrective question here, and I believe there are times when one must take action against abuse. But correction and forgiveness are two different things. Correction reestablishes boundaries and safety and allows for the rebuilding of trust. Forgiveness frees the soul of unnecessary burdens. Jesus does answer the forgiveness question. He tells Peter to stop counting. In the parable of the unjust servant he invites Peter to consider the larger context of his hurts. Like the priest with his friends, Jesus gives Peter the rest of the story on his own hurts. If you take a step back you will put your own pain in perspective, and it will not rule you so cruelly. How much have you been forgiven, Peter?

But this is not just for Bible times. I sat in the courtroom dumbfounded. I was attending the trial of two young men who had brutally killed and mutilated the body of a 12 year-old boy in my parish in South Texas. I had buried the boy. The church had been filled to capacity. People came because they were outraged that such a thing should happen in our community. The two killers had just received life sentences for their deed. The judge asked if any of the victim's family wanted to speak. The mother stood up. She has a 3rd grade education, and has worked menial jobs all her life. She turned to the mother of the two convicted murderers and said, "I know what you feel, for I feel the same. This day we both have lost our sons."

Think back to the person whose memory is the most difficult for you to call up. Tell yourself in no uncertain terms just what the wrong was. Now, with the action fully present and your response in full awareness, think of the worst thing you have ever done in your life. It may or may not be worse than the offense—that is not the point. You were forgiven, were you not? God always forgives. Have no fear of that. How can you bear unforgiveness in your heart when you have received so much?

The first step in forgiveness is to take a step back. Of what have I been forgiven? To not forgive is to be false, to be untrue to what I have received. Forgiveness is an act of integrity.

Joseph's brothers stand before him with jaws agape and paralyzed with fear. Out of jealousy they had sold him into slavery in Egypt but God had raised him to second-in-command of the land. When seven years of drought decimated the crops Joseph had established a way to feed the people. Now his brothers, hungry and bereft, stand before their brother with empty cups and empty stomachs and empty hearts. He, powerful as he was, could have had them slain on command. Yet he says something truly remarkable: "What you intended for evil turned out to serve a lot of good. God has placed me here to save many lives, including yours."

But this is not just for Bible times. On December 9, 1979 Marcus Brown was involved in an automobile accident involving a 19-year old drunk driver. Marcus died of his injuries. His mother, Becky Brown, channeled her grief into forming the first chapter of MADD—Mothers against Drunk Drivers. MADD has been a powerhouse of action against underage drinking and driving.

The second step in forgiveness is to look for the good caused. Redemption is when good comes out of evil. The greatest example is the Cross. To kill the One who is God among us is the worst humanity could possibly do, and yet out of that morass of evil God brings forth the salvation of the world.

The second great context is to tease out the gifts given you through your hurts. Gratitude has a way of making resentment evaporate. One can actually get to the place where one gives thanks for what one suffered. So think how your life has been different because of the event you just recalled. What good has come out of the situation? What special abilities or capacities has dealing with the hurt given you? What special calling or sensitivity to need has come of it? What wisdom have you learned?

Forgiveness is a gift to yourself of freedom. You are freeing yourself from carrying around a sack of rocks. You are freeing yourself of the unrelenting remorse of unforgiven guilt. It is a gift of integrity and peace.