

Gen. 50:15-21 Ps. 103:1-13 Ro. 14:1-12 Mt. 18:21-35

An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. I have a score to settle. An accounting must be made. Justice must be served. This is the economy of the world. It is not God's economy. It is not the way of God's people; a called-out people. People of faith are called out of the ways of the world; 'chosen' in our response to God's will by a desire to reflect back out into the world, God's love and mercy as we have experienced God's love and mercy. (1 Pet. 2:9-10)

Many of us who embrace the Christian faith know in our hearts the freedom of forgiveness and the lightness of feeling the weight lifted from the debt of sin cancelled. Many of us acknowledge that our lives could not measure up under God's judgment, let alone by the scrutiny of other human beings.

In a hostile world where score-keeping is the norm Christians are called to stop counting! to not 'even the score' but to forgive yet not forget. [19 years after 9/11 – we remember] Name aloud what must be remembered.

In the Genesis story, the cruelty done to Joseph by his brothers, is ultimately cast aside by Joseph, and the good message of God's grace is uttered by him beginning with the words, "Do not be afraid." This is the message of angels. He reminds his brothers that in the hands of God, harm intended is transformed into healing and preservation.

In the alternate Old Testament readings, the Egyptians getting their come-uppance as they are engulfed by the sea - chariots, horses, riders, all is viewed by the freed Israelites as the Lord's vengeance. It is remembered in the Song of Moses, whereby "Vengeance is mine" says the Lord. (Dt. 32:35) Called out of bondage, God's people do not need to be enslaved to revenge and retaliation. God's people are freed from score -keeping.

The Christian tradition names it too, in St. Paul's letter to the Romans (ch.12): "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (17-19,21)

The weight and burden, the binding of our hearts by hatred, is removed by God's mercy and we are loosed to love and live. In a letter to persecuted Christian communities around 80 a.d. throughout the five provinces of Asia Minor, the author of 1 Peter exhorts the called-out people of faith to "not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary to repay with a blessing." (3:9) This letter is written in the tradition of St. Peter, yes the very one who asks Jesus in today's gospel, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Seven is not a random number. Symbolically, seven is seen as a number of perfection, originating in Genesis as fullness and completion. Seven in its various manifestations, appears over 800 times in the Bible! Perhaps it is with a desire to strive for perfecting the praxis of his faith that Peter asks, "as many as seven times?"

In our finite human imaginations, can we even conceive of just how much forgiveness is given by God? Seventy times seven? Or Seventy-Seven times? Whichever translation one uses the point is this... Forgiveness is unfathomable. Deeper than the sea. Beyond interstellar space. Incomprehensible. Unlimited! Don't bother trying to count!

Am I naïve? Do I think that everything can be solved by forgiveness? Do I dare suggest that people who have suffered tremendous abuse and violence should forgive and forget? No! Accountability and forgiveness are allies to one another. There's a reason Law and Grace come as a package deal. But there is a strong distinction between justice and retaliation.

"Nelson Mandela, on being freed from 26 years of imprisonment in S. Africa, felt bitter toward his captors; however he was determined to claim his inner freedom, to forgive and not to resent. 'Resentment,' he said, 'is like drinking poison and waiting for it to kill your enemy.'" (Br. Curtis Almquist, "Reconciliation Presumes Forgiveness" 4.18.2013)

I found an incredible documentary from 2007 called "The Power of Forgiveness" directed by Martin Doblmeir. It testifies to the urgent need and demonstrates what's possible, amazing transformational healing that results when forgiveness is practiced individually and communally.

Here are some 'take-aways' that I'd like to share: Firstly, educating communities and youth in schools at all ages has the potential to transform violence and hatred into understanding and mutuality.

One example offered in the film are the efforts in Northern Ireland through the International Forgiveness Institute using "Forgiveness education" in primary schools. It was a hurdle for communities whose identities are so strongly rooted in religious prejudice to even consider it. Parents were strongly opposed to it until conversations uncovered individuals' forgiveness experienced within their communities. More importantly, these searching public conversations revealed that forgiveness begins with accepting one's own forgiveness. It brought into awareness that justice is not ignored but rather encourages being 'tough minded' and 'soft hearted.'

A second key takeaway is the strength of habitual forgiveness. The Amish community in which forgiveness is embedded was tested beyond measure on Oct. 2nd, 2006 when five girls were murdered and five others wounded in a schoolhouse shooting. I was struck by one man saying, "we have to work at this everyday. We have to start over everyday."

Another example of an individual defying the odds of scorekeeping; opted for forgiveness towards the murderer of his elderly mother. He says that he was only able to do so because he had the gift of scientifically studying the effect of forgiveness for over a decade. He made a commitment to share his knowledge of the power of forgiveness through his teaching at the college level.

I'll add that many people who work the 12 step program in AA are able to maintain sobriety through ongoing amends making. Justified anger is known to be a leading cause of loss of sobriety.

The power of asking for forgiveness and receiving forgiveness is the gateway to peace for troubled souls. On the other hand, scorekeeping only inflicts more self-harm and harm of others.

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel “who once declared that those who murdered so many of his people must never be forgiven” asked the German government why “despite reparations and such, [they] had never asked for the forgiveness of the Jewish people.” (readthespirit.com review) His invitation opened the pathway, leading to the German president’s address to the Israeli Parliament, “the essence of his speech being a formal apology for the treatment of the Jews by the Nazis.”

Maybe instead of ‘keeping score’ we can ‘count our blessings’. By practicing forgiveness as a spiritual discipline, we can strengthen our ability to live in mutuality with one another. By cultivating forgiveness, we can draw strength from it when the really big stuff challenges us to love as Jesus commands. “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Revenge says, “I’m going to make them pay.” Love says, “I will forgive. Seventy times seven.” What will you and I say, when we must answer? And we must, for the consequences of withholding mercy are infinitely great, if we do not forgive a brother or sister from our heart, as God demands in the final verse of our gospel.

Amma Susan+