

March 1, 2015

“Risking Forgiveness: The Cross”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris



Mark 8: 31-38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

On this Second Sunday in Lent, our thoughts turn to the cross. Or rather, better said, Jesus turns our thoughts to the cross. Not a turn most of us would choose, would we? Mark says that Jesus had begun to teach his disciples. “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by all the authorities. And be killed. And then, after three days, rise from the dead.”

There they were, on probably a beautiful day, walking together to the village of Caesarea Philipii. And this is what he chooses to talk with them about? Suffering...death...resurrection? No wonder Peter, who loved him so much, wanted to talk him out of it. Wouldn't we? But, oh, Peter, Jesus replied. You are holding onto human thoughts. I want to teach you the mind of God. Take up your cross and follow me.

How do we think about what it means to follow him by taking up our cross? The cross—the place of death, yes. But also the place of forgiveness. Astonishing, mind-blowing, world-changing forgiveness.

The Book Study group this month read and discussed a book called The Book of Forgiving by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter, the Rev. Mpho Tutu. I commend it to you all. It's not a long book or a hard read, but if you let it, it will take you to deep places in your heart and soul. It will call you to reflect and tell the truth of your own life and find the humanity in the heart of the other and it will show you how forgiveness leads to healing and sets you free.

The Tutus, both Anglican priests, based their book on the story of Jesus on the cross. Forgiveness is essential for people of all faiths and of no faith, they insist, but for us Christians, disciples of Jesus, the people of the Way, his way, this is his story and our story. It is the story of the repentant criminal who was crucified on a cross next to the cross of Jesus. He was a man who had committed crimes punishable by death. And that day, as the two were dying, side by side, Jesus promised that, because of his repentance, they would indeed see each other in paradise. He was forgiven.

Here we see into the heart of Jesus and into the mind of God. Think about it! Even Peter, who was trying to talk Jesus out of all this downer talk, is the same disciple, one of the twelve, who betrayed his friendship with Jesus and denied him---not once, but three times. For this, Peter was forgiven and was made the chief apostle, the rock, upon whom Jesus established the church itself.

There's even an old legend from the early church, sort of like from the Midrash of Christian teaching, about what Jesus was doing on Holy Saturday, that quiet, dark day between Good Friday and Easter. It was said that Jesus needed that time to go all the way down to hell and find Judas, the disciple that had betrayed him over to the soldiers, find him and bring him back. Forgiven.

I don't know. It's an old story that speaks to the truth of who Jesus is. For it was Jesus, remember, who from that cross reached deep into his own heart and said of those who were torturing and killing him: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” This is the foundation of the faith that leads the Tutus to assert: “there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of or beyond forgiveness.”

As I said to the Book group, only someone with the unimpeachable moral authority of Archbishop Desmond Tutu could make a statement like that and stand behind it 1000% and cause us to know that we have to grapple with its truth. Only a man who endured apartheid in South Africa and chaired that country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and heard countless real-life stories akin to crucifixion could make a faith claim like that.

He cites many such stories throughout the book. One is the story of Kia Scherr. In 2008, her husband, Alan, and 13-year-old daughter, Naomi, travelled to Mumbai for a mediation retreat. They were exchanging phone and email messages until Nov. 26th when the messages stopped. The news on CNN showed a bombing at a hotel. Two days later, Kia Scherr was notified that her husband and daughter had been killed in the blast.

She describes sitting on the sofa with her family watching the news, numb and in shock. She wrote: "As we watched...we saw that there was one lone surviving terrorist. As I looked at his photo...the words of Jesus Christ came to me: 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.' I wasn't a religious person, but these were the words I heard. In that moment, I turned to my family and said: 'We must forgive them.' Everyone was shocked. They thought I had lost my mind. But at that moment I just said what I felt to be true. I felt a ray of peace enter my heart, and I knew it was the right thing to do. I knew the only way I could go on living was to forgive the terrorists. In those moments, I knew that forgiveness was essential, so I forgave. 'There is already enough hate,' I told my family. 'We must send our love and compassion...it is a choice I make every day.'"

To be honest with you, I don't know--and I hope I never have to find out--but I don't know if I would be strong and clear enough to say the same. For Kia Scheer, this realization seemed to come in an instant. As Desmond Tutu observes, most of us need a lifetime. Forgiveness is a living practice, an on-going process of forgiving and healing. And the Tutus are clear what forgiveness is NOT: it is not a subversion of justice, not a denial of the harm, or a forgetting of the event. It is a choice, a daily choice as Kia Scheer said, to choose love over hate and to insist on the humanity of each and every person. It is to choose Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

What Jesus is asking of us, in these few verses from Mark's gospel, is nothing less than the turning over of our lives to his Way. It is a losing of our life in order to find it. To take up our cross is to take up his cross in the same manner as did he. It is the way of forgiveness.

Forgiveness transforms our story and our suffering. It opens up the possibility of a new future. For Peter, forgiveness offered the grace to leave behind a past of ignorance and betrayal. For Judas, forgiveness offered a chance at new life. For the thief on the cross, forgiveness brought pardon and a path to heaven. For Jesus, forgiveness from the cross conquered suffering and death and opened the door to resurrection.

Jesus was teaching his disciples that day as they walked along. He was teaching them even from the cross. He is still teaching us. We still have a lot to learn. May this Lent be a season when we walk with him to the cross, even as we take up our own. May this Lent be a season when we remember the forgiveness Christ has given us, each and every one of us, and strive in turn to offer it to others. And through this Lent, may the peace and love of God, which indeed surpass all understanding, work in us to transform us from the inside out, the joy of Easter beginning to dawn in hearts even now.

Amen.

Notes:

Desmond tutu and Mpho Tutu. The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World. New York: HarperOne, 2014.

© Rev. Patricia Farris, 2015. Permission is given for brief quotation with attribution. All other rights reserved.