

Into the Deepest Ocean

With last week's revelation on the mountain, Jesus now turns toward Jerusalem. There is a new urgency to his ministry and to his determination to shape the community that will continue that ministry. Matthew's 18th chapter is concerned with how the community of disciples is to interact with one another and with outsiders. Jesus continues to speak here and in the chapters to come about the kingdom of heaven. As you may recall, this kingdom is not off in the clouds or in the world to come, but here on earth. In Jesus, as John the Baptist told us, the kingdom of heaven has come near. In his final weeks, Jesus is driven to reveal more fully just what that means. Earlier in this chapter, the disciples have asked him what it means to be great in this kingdom. He places a child in front of them and insists that they must become children, willing to be on the edge of things, vulnerable in the midst of a world that values power and might. He speaks of the importance of seeking lost sheep, and here he lifts up forgiveness as an essential component of the community of faith. [Read Matthew 18:15-35, CEB]

I have vague memories of reading *The Hiding Place* in middle school. This book tells the story of Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch woman who along with her family sheltered Jews, refugees, and mentally disabled men and women during the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam. She and her sister, Betsie were sent to a concentration camp where Betsie eventually died. Just two weeks later, Corrie was released due to a clerical error. One week later, the women in her age group in that camp were sent to the gas chamber:

After the war, ten Boom returned to The Netherlands to set up a rehabilitation center in Bloemendaal. The refugee houses housed...concentration-camp survivors and sheltered the jobless Dutch who previously collaborated with Germans during the Occupation exclusively until 1950, when it accepted anyone in need of care.¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corrie_ten_Boom

Corrie became a public speaker and traveled the world sharing stories of her life before, during, and after the war. On one tour in Germany, she writes:

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavyset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear.

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown.

'When we confess our sins,' I said, 'God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever.' The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: 'A fine message, *fräulein!* How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!' And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

‘You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk,’ he was saying. ‘I was a guard in there.’ No, he did not remember me.

‘But since that time,’ he went on, ‘I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. *Fräulein*’—again the hand came out—‘will you forgive me?’

And I stood there—I whose sins had every day to be forgiven—and could not. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. ‘If you do not forgive [others] their trespasses,’ Jesus says, ‘neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.’

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

‘Jesus, help me!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’ And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.²

It's astounding, isn't it? To forgive the Nazi guard who played a part in your sister's death, and in the suffering and deaths of so many. Peter asks Jesus just how much forgiveness is required of the disciples. "Seventy times seven," Jesus replies. It's not that Jesus expects us to keep score; it's that Jesus expects us to be part of shaping a community that is not bound by grudges, bitterness, and anger, but rather grounded and liberated by forgiveness, by letting go, releasing the hurt and the wrong we inevitably do to one another. To release and let go just as God does with us, releasing us from the sin we commit in turning on God and God's children and throwing into the depths of the deepest sea. And yet, stories like this one seem so beyond me, so beyond most of us, so grand. Ten Boom's account is almost as absurd and extraordinary as a king forgiving a slave for racking up a debt of 10,000 talents, a sum that would take a servant 150,000 years to earn. No one owes me that much. I've never been in a concentration camp where I watched my sister die. I've never had to shake the hand of a guard who could have saved her. Unlike the survivors of the Mother Emmanuel shooting in Charleston, I've never had to stare down my child's assailant in court, so I've never had to find it in myself to forgive on such a scale. But I am still forgiven. I am still that slave who owes far more than I can even begin to imagine repaying. I am forgiven and am called to forgive others.

Ten Boom goes on to say that with that big forgiveness moment, the little ones became easy. Or actually she goes on to say she wishes that were true:

I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn't... You would have thought that, having forgiven the Nazi guard, this would have been child's play. It wasn't. For weeks I seethed inside.³

Some of Corrie's friends had hurt her, and she struggled to forgive them fully. After several weeks, she confided in a Lutheran pastor:

² https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-on-forgiveness?fbclid=IwAR1PV6wDklatVrqrBdz1_aGwJjhLOZt2JUUn6iuH-zGdUY4wc12B1sMvVQs. Thanks to my colleague Michael Kirby who pointed me to this article.

³ https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-on-forgiveness?fbclid=IwAR1PV6wDklatVrqrBdz1_aGwJjhLOZt2JUUn6iuH-zGdUY4wc12B1sMvVQs

‘Up in that church tower,’ he said, nodding out the window, ‘is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First *ding* then *dong*. Slower and slower until there’s a final *dong* and it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive someone, we take our hand off the rope. But if we’ve been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn’t be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They’re just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.’

And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversation. But the force—which was my willingness in the matter—had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at last stopped altogether. [The bell may have stopped ringing, but something lingered.] Many years later, in 1970, an American with whom I had shared the ding-dong principle came to visit me in Holland and met the people involved. ‘Aren’t those the friends who let you down?’ he asked as they left my apartment. ‘Yes,’ I said a little smugly. ‘You can see it’s all forgiven.’ ‘By you, yes,’ he said. ‘But what about them? Have they accepted your forgiveness?’ ‘They say there’s nothing to forgive! They deny it ever happened. But I can prove it!’ I went eagerly to my desk. ‘I have it in black and white! I saved all their letters and I can show you where—’ ‘Corrie!’ My friend slipped his arm through mine and gently closed the drawer. ‘Aren’t you the one whose sins are at the bottom of the sea? And are the sins of your friends etched in black and white?’ For an anguishing moment I could not find my voice. ‘Lord Jesus,’ I whispered at last, ‘who takes all my sins away, forgive me for preserving all these years the evidence against others! Give me grace to burn all the blacks and whites as a sweet-smelling sacrifice to Your glory.’⁴

So while I’ll admit that I take a certain amount of comfort knowing that Corrie ten Boom held on to those letters, my comfort is short-lived. I feel sure that I have a stash tucked away of people who have wronged me in small and not-so-small ways, a list of who has hurt me or stung me, a stockpile of grudges over slights and hurts that I keep a tight grip on. I don’t want to be one to prove Jesus right, that forgiveness takes practice, and that

⁴ https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-on-forgiveness?fbclid=IwAR1PV6wDklatVrqrDz1_aGwJjhLOZt2JUUns6iuH-zGdUY4wc12B1sMvVQs

I'll have to do it over and over and over again, that we have to let go of the hurts, the slights, and the stings, over and over again, but I do. We do. It's not that forgiveness is a free pass. It's not that anything goes. There are consequences, and as a community with any integrity, we are called to slip our arms through one another's and continue to encourage and even challenge one another to be a people of forgiveness, to let go of the black and white, because our sins lie at the bottom of the sea, too.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment and imagine a place where you may have tucked away your list of blacks and whites, as ten Boom calls them. Maybe it is a drawer in a desk. Maybe it is a gilded box with an ornate key. Maybe it is a dusty shelf in a workshop. Maybe it is a Rubbermaid tub in the garage. Open it and look at what is stored there, for a moment. It will be tempting to pore over everything, to rehearse and rehash the various hurts and stings you have tucked away for safe keeping. Instead, imagine pulling them out or dumping them—all of them—out and letting them go. And then get rid of them. Maybe you burn them in your imagination. Maybe you simply place them in the trash for Penn Waste to collect. Or maybe you fling them into the depths of the Atlantic where your sins and mine have already been flung by our gracious and forgiving God.

It will take more than one trip to that place—at least for me I'm guessing. I'm sure I will be tempted to overlook one little slight that I am just too fond of stewing over. And so by the grace of God, I'll keep going back and dumping it out again, keep releasing it, seventy times seven, and more, until it is truly gone. Not because God won't forgive me—that's a done deal, but because only when I am able to make a regular practice of letting go of all the hurts and stings that I insist on clinging to, will I even begin to grasp the power of God's forgiveness of me and mine. And then, day by day, moment by moment, I will begin to see just how audacious God's love truly is and how audacious this God continues to be in working through forgiven disciples—like me, and you, and us—to transform this world into the kingdom of heaven.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.