Where Does Forgiveness Come From

In today’s Gospel, we see the travesty of an enslaved person who disassociates from his own pain and fear, lacking any empathy for another in a position he was recently in. He heaps misery, not relief upon this person because he lacks what the Rev. Kristin Kaulbach Miles describes as a spaciousness of spirit. “Love is space. To come from a place of love is to be in acceptance of what is, and allow others to be just as they are,” which requires imagination, humility, and a ceaselessly forgiving heart. The readings are Exodus 14:19–31, Romans 14:1–12 and Matthew 18:21–35.

Sermon Transcript:

In the name of the one who creates, redeems, and sustains us. If you visit Bellevue Hospital here in New York, you will walk through a series of long hallways, jigging and jagging, before you get to the bank of elevators that takes you to the various units. In the longest of these hallways, you will find note after note, drawings, posters, taped to the wall. These are expressions of appreciation, love, gratitude, and encouragement for the staff of the hospital. Some are made by children to acknowledge the courage and sacrifice of their parents in caring for patients day after day, pushing through fatigue and personal risk for their vocation. It seemed to me walking down that hallway with some blue tiles for added effect, that these people through their faithful grid and grace, parted the waters that were flooding our community so that we could pass through to the other side. They face the deluge of loss, and I thought of their experience with the description of the drowning multitude described in Exodus. They witnessed to a staggering rate of death, they made a way through this intense time which has lessened, but still threatens.

In the book of Exodus, we read of such timely topics as plague, fire, dislocation, the targeting of people who are deemed different, the constant challenge to a cohesive national identity, victory and harsh vengeance, staggering misjudgment, liberation and epiphany are all combined. We need our scriptures, both as they hold up a mirror to help us see our own human nature, and for the remedies they prescribe. I think the parallel that most speaks to me now, is that the Israelites have a journey to make, a cloud by day and a fire by night, one step at a time. We as individuals in a nation are making our journey, and we have our divine presence that is less obvious and cinematic, but nonetheless, real. We have understanding and compassion and forgiveness, we’ll call that the cloud. The energy and expansiveness and organization for skillful action, we’ll call that the fire. Like the journey of the Israelites it’s bumpy and fraught, but we have guidance. We can see understanding and compassion modeled in our reading from Romans.

In the Church of Rome, there are tensions from the differences between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Paul’s bias is apparent. ‘Weak’ would not be a self-chosen designation for a group. But his instruction is clear and strong. The term that Paul uses to encourage right relationship is the simple imperative: welcome. Depending on the translation, this instruction is even stronger than welcome. It carries the sense of bring in as a partner, or take hold of. Paul reminds us that the root of conflict is not only difference of opinion, but also power differential, and the spiritual discipline of welcome is a
needed grace for all sides. To welcome someone with whom we disagree requires imagination. In his book, The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Making Peace, Paul Lederach shares his wisdom from decades, of being in places in intractable conflict. That to do the work of peace takes four key capacities of moral imagination, which Jesus modeled.

First, to be able to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships, one that includes even our enemies. Second, the ability to embrace complexity without getting caught up in social schism. Third, a commitment to the creative act. Forth, an acceptance of the risk that necessarily goes along with attempts to transcend violence. As we personally work toward our capacity for this moral imagination, we are collectively called to raise up leaders who demonstrate it. Most of us can more readily start with something more familiar and immediate, to support welcome, to draw upon our own experience. The simple challenge of being human, to come from a place of humility. Humility is from the word humilis, it means of the Earth. Humility is to be connected with our own experience on this Earth without minimizing or denying or avoiding.

Through humility, we are in touch with the full range of emotions in our lives, including the pain and the fear, not dissociating from them such that we are unable to be kind to ourselves in our own struggle or to relate to the struggles of others. What we see in the Gospel is a travesty of the slave who had just been fearing painful repercussion and was given relief, but loses all connection with the experience of feeling trapped and fearful he had a moment ago, and has no empathy for another in the position he was in. In fact, he heaps misery, not relief upon this other person. The Reverend angel Kyodo Williams teaches that for us to transform ourselves as a society, we have to allow ourselves to be transformed as individuals, and for us to be transformed as individuals, we have to allow a real forgiveness for the complexity of human beings. She continues, "The way that I think of love most often these days, is that love is space."

It is developing our own capacity for spaciousness within ourselves to allow others to be as they are, that is love." That doesn’t mean that we don’t have hopes or wishes that things are changed or shifted, but to come from a place of love is to be in acceptance of what is, even in the face of moving it towards something that is more whole, more just, more spacious for all of us. It is about expanding our capacity for love. She said that this is what most empowered Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., this awareness, that was at the base of all advocacy of all policy. When Peter asked Jesus how many times he needs to forgive? Jesus instructs him that forgiveness is not a onetime act, but a continuous way of living, it’s an ability we develop. Forgiveness doesn’t just happen because it’s a good thing to do, and because we should do it. It comes with understanding, getting in touch with the hard feelings we have ourselves, and the understanding that others have this themselves.

Forgiveness comes from our ability to expand. Forgiveness is not to be reserved for just those times when it is asked for. Peter's inquiry makes no mention of repentance by the offending party. It's about a spaciousness that we develop in ourselves that is not dependent on the initiation or response of another person. I think of this divine presence of the cloud and the fire that we find spaciousness in between them. There is this cloud of wisdom, forgiveness, and understanding, and we travel with it even as we stumble, and also that we are being cloaked in it, sitting within it. That simply taking a moment again and again to quietly just breathe and pray and see how our thoughts ebb and flow in rage. This supports our insight, our awareness of ourselves, and others, and the divine. Then there is the fire that provides the energy. As Dylan Thomas says, "The force through which the green fuse drives the flower." What ignites that awareness?
The awareness that we have power to take on things individually and collectively, supports our determination to persevere and overcome. I've always loved this description of Audre Lorde by a colleague who recalled Lorde's, "Commitment to confront the worst so that she was freed to experience the best." What helps you to animate you, to give you greater expansion for forgiveness and understanding and compassion and facing hard things? Do that, listen to that, join others in that. A parishioner has been telling me that we all need to hear more about joy and I recently came across a reflection that points out that joy comes from getting real. We don't have to wait for things to get resolved or healed or fixed or satisfactory before we can know joy because joy is not about pleasure as opposed to pain or cheerfulness as opposed to sadness. Joy allows for complexity. Joy includes it all. It's all there for us between the cloud and the fire.

I want to end with a song that I heard again just the other day after a long time and it had joy for me. This piece, just listening to it, moving to it gave me the sense that even as fires and plague and violence and misunderstanding combust, there is also understanding, compassion, engagement in this world. That we can be courageous like those heroes at Bellevue and Audre Lorde and Paul Lederach. I want to make a special dedication to Gabriel Bonadie, who is a beloved parishioner of ours. This is my first time wearing the stole and the altarpiece, and Gabriel gave so much in his life to love and serve community. So it's also a special dedication to him. I invite you to listen to this now about how one beat gets added onto another, how one instrument after another joins in. This is how the Holy Spirit works. Turn it way up if you like it and move, and if you don't like it, turn it way down and put on something that makes you want to move. It's going to go for a few minutes. We walk in divine presence between the cloud and the fire.

Amen.