

Michael Gehring
“A Costly Grace”
Matthew 6: 7-15
Main Street UMC
November 11, 2018

“Rabbi Epstein was giving his Yom Kippur sermon about forgiveness and during his speech he asked his congregation, *‘How many of you have forgiven your enemies?’*

About half of them held up their hands. He then rephrased his question, *‘How many of you want to forgive your enemies?’* Slowly, every hand in the congregation went up, except for one, little old Sadie Horowitz.

‘Mrs. Horowitz?’ inquired the Rabbi, *‘Are you not willing to forgive your enemies, especially on this Day of Atonement when God forgives us all?’*

‘I don’t have any enemies,’ Mrs. Horowitz replied, smiling sweetly.

‘Mrs. Horowitz, that is even more impressive. How old are you?’

‘Ninety-eight,’ she replied.

‘Oh Mrs. Horowitz, what a blessing and a lesson to us all you are. Would you please stand up and in front of this congregation tell us all how a person can live to be ninety-eight and not have an enemy in the world?’

Little old Mrs. Horowitz got up slowly, smiled, faced the congregation, and said, *‘I’ve outlived all those old witches.’*” (From website aish.com with slight modifications)

Forgiveness, it’s a whole lot easier to talk about than to live it. Yet Jesus thought that the teaching of forgiveness is so important that he incorporated it into the only prayer we know of that he taught his disciples. It sure is a whole lot easier to say the Lord’s prayer than it is to live it. *“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sins against us.”*

This story happened a long time ago, before there were automobiles and such, back in the days when people walked most of the places they went. Two monks had gone to a week-long conference on spirituality at a monastery that was a day’s walk from their home. When the conference was over, they set out walking back. About mid-morning, they came to a fast running creek. There was no boat to haul one across. You simply had to wade through it. At the bank was a teenage girl who obviously was afraid to cross it. One monk asked her if she wanted to cross the creek. She said yes. He carried her across it. When they got to the other side, he put her down and the two monks went on their way. Toward evening, they were walking up the path to the gates of their monastery and the other monk said to the one who had carried the girl, *“Brother, you know we’re not supposed to have anything to do with women. I’m troubled by you. Why did you carry that girl across the water? It’s just not proper.”* The monk who had carried the girl replied,

“Brother, I left that girl on the side of the creek she wanted to be on. Why are you still carrying her in your heart?”

Letting go, that’s a difficult thing to master. Some things you just want to hold onto. Some grudges are tasty. Frederick Buechner said, *“Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain your are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”*

Our political life in our nation these days seems to be all about settling scores. Some grudges for some people are so delicious that they can’t ever seem to vision a reality in which that is not part it. The grudges become a defining part of who they are. It is also part of our cultural heritage. Can you think of a Hatfield without a McCoy? I mean what would have happened if after the first insult and before any blood was shed, had one of them taken over to the grieved a massive chicken casserole with a card attached saying, *“I’m sorry.”*

What would have happened? Perhaps a whole lot of Hollywood movies wouldn’t have been made but more importantly lives wouldn’t have been senselessly cut short. And this too is a whole lot easier said than done. My grandmother was the saintliness person I’ve ever known. Decades ago, I stopped by her house for a cup of coffee and she was agitated. I asked her, *“What’s wrong?”* and she said, *“I’m just remembering about a time that someone done me wrong.”* It had happened thirty years before.

In a letter to Phoebe Hesketh 14 June 1960, C.S. Lewis was talking about the difficulties of forgiving those closest to us. Phoebe had written to him about the troubles that a housemaster had inflicted on her. Lewis’s reply to her was written one month before the death of his beloved wife, Joy, but the end was in sight. Lewis wrote, *“I’d sooner be you than that housemaster—or than the Doctor (one of the closest friends) who could and should have diagnosed Joy’s trouble when she went to him about the symptoms years ago before we were married. The real trouble about the duty of forgiveness is that you do it with all your might on Monday and then find on Wednesday that it hasn’t stayed put and all has to be done over again.”*

We all struggle with the duty of forgiveness and it helps me to learn about people who have forgiven the unimaginable when we sometimes have trouble forgiving people who cut us off in traffic. One of those sources of inspiration is Nelson Mandela, the late former president of South Africa.

Onetime, Mandela was walking in the Rose Garden with Bill Clinton. Bill says, *“Now Nelson, I know how you have worked for peace. How you have*

transformed your own people through your example. But tell me something, wasn't there just a little bit of anger in you at those men who held you unjustly in jail for twenty-seven years of your life. Wasn't there just something there?" Mandela replied, *"For those twenty-seven years, I wanted nothing more than my freedom. And when I walked out of that jail cell, past those bars, out of the gates of that prison, I wanted to be free. And I knew if I didn't forgive them before I left, when I exited the gates, I would have still been their prisoner if I carried them in my heart. And I wanted to be free."*

Nelson Mandela was educated and trained by Methodists. And you know he had that Joseph experience where those who held him in prison were one day under his control and power. Imagine Mandela who had 27 years of his life stolen; now he's president of a new nation and he could have done anything he wanted, exacted any kind of revenge, could have engaged in any kind of vengeance, yet instead he guided his nation in the peaceful process of truth, reconciliation, and grace.

He was able to lead them in grace because his savior, Christ our Lord, had extended grace to him. You see he knew the Christian story of sin, forgiveness and restitution because the Methodists taught him how to pray and taught him the faith.

What burdens are you carrying in your heart today that you just haven't been able to lay down? Who are you angry at and who do you need to forgive? You can hold them tight, savor those grudges, or you can let them go.

Let us take just a few moments of silent prayer and give over to God all that binds us, all those grudges we carry, and won't let go of. Let us in prayer give them to God.