

Palm Sunday

March 24, 2024

Bystander

Victoria L. Garvey

*Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but,
I tell you, seventy-seven times.”*

—Matthew 18:22

On the surface, forgiveness is not much in evidence in either Mark’s palm story or his passion narrative; it’s much more at home in the Lucan version. Mark, for instance, has no time for such niceties as Jesus’ plea from the cross, “Father forgive them ...” (Luke 23:34). We readers/over-hearers, however, are invited into thoughtful and sometimes disturbing contemplation about forgiveness. Not WWJD?, but who are we really and what would we have done had these events transpired in our neighborhood?

Generally, the congregation gets to play the part of “the crowd” during the liturgy of the passion these days, a role with which we’re mightily uncomfortable. We’d never have behaved that way. No, not us loyal latter-day disciples! But that first-century “crowd” shows up several times earlier in Jesus’ ministry. On those occasions, they’re always either drawn to him out of interested curiosity or enthusiastically on his side (33 times prior to Gethsemane in chapter 14). Only after Jesus’ arrest does the tide turn, and the “crowd” moves from support to condemnation because they listened to loud voices muttering fake news, because they were afraid to be counted among the risk-takers, because they feared losing hold of their own tenuous grasp of what was deemed acceptable behavior by their contemporaries.

Over and over, we are reminded that even those closest to Jesus during his ministry are capable of turning way, of betrayal and cowardice. And not just the bit part-ers—the crowd—but also Peter and Judas and the others, including the anonymous disciple who ran away half naked (Mark 14:51-52). For them, we have little



March 25, 2024

Forgiving with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind

We embrace our self-righteous non-forgiveness, however, at our peril. I cringe when I think of the times I haven't had the courage to stand against injustice, when I've stayed safely hidden in the crowd, afraid to rally to the support of others who are being unjustly treated or condemned or dismissed as less than worthy.

—Vicki Garvey

The two Gospel readings for Palm Sunday create completely different emotional reactions within us when we hear them read. The first reading tells of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as he is greeted with the words, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" The second Gospel tells the story of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. The readings together take us on quite a dramatic journey.

In yesterday's reflection, Vicki Garvey invited us to some authentic soul-searching as she challenged us to think about how we too can act like the crowd in the Passion Gospel, refusing to stand up for the injustice that is being done to Jesus. When have we "stayed safely hidden in the crowd" and not taken the risk to speak up when others are being treated unfairly?

We can do this hard work of acknowledging our sin of complacency because we know that our honest confession opens the door to forgiveness, just as it did for Jesus' followers.

Making it Personal: Can you think of a time recently when you did not speak out or act in the face of injustice? Do you want to ask for forgiveness for this? Is there someone you know who is being treated unfairly that you want to stand up for right now?

March 26, 2024

Foolishly Forgiving

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

—1 Corinthians 1:18

This passage from 1 Corinthians reminds us that much of the wisdom of the Christian faith can seem foolish in our modern world. What is sometimes associated with weakness in our culture is often just what our Christian faith teaches us to do. As we reflect on our theme this Lenten season, practicing forgiveness, we can see how this is true.

Often the world inadvertently teaches that to acknowledge wrongdoing and to ask for forgiveness are signs of weakness. An example of this would be when we see public figures making, at best, half-hearted apologies when they have been exposed in some wrongdoing. And even then, they often are only apologizing because they feel forced to do so. It appears that they associate asking for forgiveness with being weak. Our faith, though, sees asking for forgiveness as a sign of strength and honest humility.

Making it Personal: How has your understanding of forgiveness changed as a result of your reflection and practice this Lent? Do you see a contrast between Christian teachings about forgiveness and how our culture thinks of it? How does that impact your life?



March 27, 2024

We Are Never Alone

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

—Hebrews 12:1

This verse from the Letter to the Hebrews continues to be meaningful for many, especially the phrase, “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” It reminds us that we are never alone; we are surrounded by others who support and guide us, both those who are living and those whom we love but no longer see. It is a reminder, too, of the importance of our faith community to our spiritual journey.

This passage also asks us to confess and let go of our sins so that we are able to run “the race that is set before us.” The wisdom here is twofold. First, it is because we are surrounded by the love and support of others that we are safe to be vulnerable enough to acknowledge our mistakes and wrongdoings. And second, that a regular practice of confession and forgiveness frees up our energy to be more fit to run the race that God has given us to run. Both of these pieces of wisdom are invaluable for our walk of faith.

Making it Personal: Who is in your “cloud of witnesses,” including both those who are living and those who have passed on? Can you think of a time when you were able to let go of the weight of something you did wrong, and how that freed you to be better able to run the race that God has given you to run?

Maundy Thursday

March 28, 2024

Forgiveness as a Journey

Jan Kwiatkowski

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

—John 13:34

Facebook and other social media platforms have such an amazing capacity to keep people connected who otherwise would be disconnected. Whether it's choosing to share family pictures, cute kitten videos, humor, information or inspiration, or even planning events, social media has tremendous power to connect. I've also seen, and maybe you have too, the potential social media has to empower people to objectify, distance, and disconnect. It is evidenced in the immediate aftermath of a disagreement when one person "unfriends" or "blocks" a family member or friend. Whether it's a momentary reaction or a more permanent choice, blocking or being blocked is a powerful rejection of a relationship and our human capacity to heal and forgive.

In the Maundy Thursday Gospel, we have the familiar and beautifully intimate story of the Last Supper and Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Jesus knew that one of his disciples would betray him to those who would crucify him. Jesus knew that Peter would deny him three times. Jesus knew that those whom he loved most in this world would abandon and hurt him most deeply. And yet, Jesus showed up for the Passover meal.

Jesus could have made any number of other choices. He could have chosen to "block" himself from his disciples and the hurt that was to come. Jesus instead chose relationship and willingness. He could have unfriended his beloved friends and not shown up to dinner. But he was willing to break bread with the people who would hurt him the most. He, as Master and teacher, was willing



to take the servant position and wash the feet of those who would hurt and betray him. Jesus didn't have to do any of this ... except that this is what love looks like. And Jesus was willing to risk the power of love.

We are human. We have been hurt, and we have caused hurt. It is a painful and challenging part of our human experience. While we cannot escape the hurt, we do have a choice about what to do with it. In the story of the washing of the disciples' feet, Jesus modeled for us a significant first step in loving and forgiving, that of "being willing."

Forgiveness, especially when we have been deeply hurt by those we love the most, is a process. Sometimes, it can be a long process. And that is okay. In order to fully forgive, we have to fully acknowledge the depth of the hurt, and that can take time. There can be very good, protective, and holy reasons for letting go of the hurt in a slow, reflective process. The important thing is showing up and being willing to engage and work with whatever the process of forgiveness is, in our own lives. The important thing is not actively "blocking" the possibility of forgiveness.

When we have been deeply hurt, sometimes the most honest prayer is: "Help me be willing to show up and work the process of forgiveness that is ahead of me." A first step in dying to self and rising to new life can be humbly and humanly acknowledging that we need to ask for help to be willing to do what love requires us to do. Active willingness is a good and holy thing.

Making it Personal: How does the story of the Last Supper deepen your understanding of the process of forgiveness? How might it help you pray for forgiveness—either for yourself or for someone else?

Good Friday

March 29, 2024

God's Loving Embrace

Jan Kwiatkowski

*I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds
no more. Where there is forgiveness of these,
there is no longer any offering for sin.*

—Hebrews 10:17-18

The moment when I plant my feet, hold my arms open wide, and ready myself to catch and lift a grandchild gleefully running toward me yelling, “Nana!” is a moment I’ve experienced many times and a moment I live for. That moment can happen when I have not seen a grandchild for months due to distance. That moment can happen when one of my grandchildren is hurting for some reason, and only Nana can fix it. Open arms and a child running, just as they are, toward love is, I think, a glimpse of what it might be like when we let go and run toward Love, the love of the One who created us.

I love little kids. They are just out there with whatever it is they are feeling or experiencing in the moment. They seek out those who will love them no matter what. It doesn’t matter if they are full of joy because they just learned to put on their socks. It doesn’t matter if they just smacked a sibling and know they did something wrong. Ultimately, that child will return to their home base of love and seek assurance that they are worthy of love ... no matter what.

As we grow into adulthood, life happens, and we seem to lose or close down our innate ability to seek out the reminders that we are fully loved children of God. We think we have to fix all the things that are wrong with us before God, or others, can love us. Maybe we can’t forgive ourselves for being human and making mistakes. And if we can’t forgive and love ourselves, we ask, how could God possibly do so?



That we are much-loved children of God is one of the lessons for us at the cross on Good Friday. Many children of God were at the cross on that Friday. There was the One who was faultless. There were those who were devoted disciples and followers. There were those who could have cared less. There were those who pounded the nails through the flesh and bone of Jesus. There were the arms of God, held wide open to anyone and everyone there. And God's wide-open arms continue to be open to all of us, right here, right now.

What if dying to self—rather than anything we could actually *do*—really has more to do with letting go of what our pride, ego, or training tell us we must do to be worthy of God's love? What if rising to new life is risking running into the arms of God, just as we are, every single day? While certainly there is the final transition from death to resurrection when each of us does die, there are also countless opportunities every single day to die to self, to forgive ourselves for being somehow “less,” and to turn toward the loving arms of God.

Much like our human feet are planted and arms are held wide open for the children we love, I think God's feet are always planted, God's arms are always open wide, and God is always ready to catch and lift every human being seeking the Love only God can give. Trusting this, are we ready and willing to run toward God's loving embrace.

Making It Personal: What is the one thing God might say to you while you are being held closely in God's arms? How would the people around you know that God held you and told you that you are a much-loved child of God, no matter what?

Holy Saturday

March 30, 2024

God Waits with Us

Jan Kwiatkowski

*He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb
and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other
Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.*

—Matthew 27:60-61

This morning's Gospel tells the story of Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus so that Jesus could have a proper burial. He rolled a great stone to close the door of the tomb and left. The two Marys sat outside the tomb and waited. While we know the outcome of Easter Day, Joseph, the two Marys, and all the rest must have been beyond devastated. They could not have known what was ahead. They only knew how the story seemed to end on Good Friday. Little did they know that the story would actually begin again on Easter Sunday. That time in between can be a horrible, hopeless and dark place. It's tough to practice faithfulness when loss and ambiguity and anxiety are all around.

There are times in our lives and in our relationships where things happen, and there is a loss, ambiguity or anxiety. Maybe it's a family disagreement over a real or perceived event. Maybe it's a betrayal by an institution we trusted or company that employed us. Maybe it's a death where we never got to make peace, or say goodbye. Maybe we did the best we could to restore the relationship, and the other person did not respond. Maybe we did not try and wish we had.

Not having closure is just hard. Not being able to make sense of things is just hard. Coming to terms with the fact that maybe we should have been the one to reach out and did not is just hard. But, it is all very human. That part of the story seems both closed- and



open-ended all at the same time. A rock has been placed outside the relationship tomb, and we wait outside, longing for an end we do not yet know.

The two Marys were at the tomb on Easter morning. We don't know if they stayed and waited all night. We don't know what they did while they waited. I'm guessing they cried, they were quiet, they told the stories over and over, they reviewed their parts in the Jesus story ... and then they reached a point outside the tomb where all they could do was wait, and wait on God. I wonder if they knew and trusted that God waited with them?

If there is a situation, relationship, or time in your life that does not have a peaceful end or closure, know that God waits with you. Know that while you cry, and you go over the story, God waits with you. Know that when you are at the point where it all feels like a never-ending loss, God waits with you. Know that God is faithful in the midst of all the ambiguity, loss and anxiety. Know that what resurrection will look like is not in your hands, but that resurrection will come.

If you are like me, you are not always good at waiting. I think of Mr. Roger's song for kids: "Let's think of something to do while we're waiting." That something to do could be prayer for ourselves and the situation or person, acts of service, or could be finding a safe person to talk to about it. It could be one more time of trying to reach out or maybe reaching out for the first time. It could be prayerfully letting go, knowing God will heal in God's time. Whatever it is you do, God waits with you at the tomb, and the promise of resurrection is as real now as it was over 2,000 years ago.

Making It Personal: In whatever situation you find yourself waiting for some end, what is a kind and gentle thing you could do for yourself while you and God wait together?

Easter Sunday

March 31, 2024

From Everlasting to Everlasting

The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ “This is my message for you.”

—Matthew 28:5-7

Our journey of thoughtful self-reflection on the topic of forgiveness these past six and a half weeks now leads us to be able to proclaim today:

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

We began Ash Wednesday with an invitation to consider the connections between love and forgiveness. Mariann Budde wrote about the wisdom of practicing the forgiveness we need as we grounded the practice of forgiveness in our faith. Lisa Senuta shared her experience of God as an ever-flowing river of grace when we let go and accept the gift that is our life in God.

Westina Matthew wrote candidly about her journey of finding grace in forgiveness, and that forgiveness is a choice, a decision we make. Andy Jones wrote about how, when we experience the gift of forgiveness for ourselves, we then learn to forgive others. Anna Noon shared through her experience of pilgrimage that when we forgive others, we experience the peace that passes “beyond our human understanding.”

On Palm Sunday, Vicki Garvey called us to repent the times when we have chosen to stay safely hidden in the crowd and failed to stand up to injustice. Jan Kwiatkowski reminded us that forgiveness is



always a process and that sometimes it is a long process, but our willingness to enter into that process is “a good and holy thing.” Through all that we have read and contemplated, we have grown in our understanding that the work of forgiveness is not easy. It often requires letting go and dying to the ego. The benefits for our souls, though, are innumerable as only when we can forgive can we experience the joy of newly resurrected relationships with ourselves, with others, and with God.

It has been an honor to provide this resource to you and to walk with you through Lent to Easter. In the name of the One who has risen from the grave this day, may we experience with all of our heart, mind, body, and soul, the everlasting compassionate love of God.
