

Message for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (9/13/2020)  
Matthew 18:21-35

I believe in miracles.

During World War II, Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian woman, and her family helped Jewish refugees flee the Nazis by hiding them in their Haarlem home. "In this household," her father, Casper, said, "God's people are always welcome." In 1944, a Dutch informant alerted the Nazis, and the ten Booms were arrested. Casper died shortly thereafter. Corrie and her sister, Betsie, were imprisoned at Ravensbrück women's labor camp, where Betsie's health steadily declined. Before she died, she told her sister, "There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still." Corrie was released from the camp fifteen days later, allegedly on account of a clerical error.

After the war, she spoke publicly throughout Europe. And, while speaking at a German church in 1947, she recognized a man in the audience as one of the guards at Ravensbrück. After the talk, he approached her, reached out his hand, and asked for her forgiveness. At first, Corrie resisted:

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!”<sup>1</sup>

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In the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, as an element of the transition to a free and democratic society, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) sought to give voice to survivors of gross human rights violations, facilitate rehabilitation and reparation, and in some cases, grant amnesty to perpetrators.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu served as chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In spite of the horrors of apartheid, throughout the TRC process he witnessed South Africans demonstrate a remarkable commitment to forgiveness. For instance, the teenage daughter of one of the Cradock Four, anti-apartheid activists who were ambushed and murdered by security police in 1985, was asked during her testimony at a TRC hearing if she would be able to forgive those who killed her father. She replied, “We would like to forgive, but we would just like to know who[m] to forgive.” “How fantastic to see this young girl,” Archbishop Tutu recalls, “still human despite all efforts to dehumanise her.”<sup>2</sup>

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Ten days after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Rais Bhuiyan, a Bangladeshi American working as a cashier at a gas station in Dallas, was shot in the face by

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<sup>1</sup> *The Hiding Place*, as cited by Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, “Forgiveness is at the Core,” [www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5454](http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5454).

<sup>2</sup> [www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/desmond-tutu/](http://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/desmond-tutu/).

a white supremacist in a self-proclaimed revenge attack. During a weeks-long spree, the gunman targeted Bhuiyan and two other men who appeared to him to be Muslim or of Middle Eastern descent. One of them was Hindu. Bhuiyan was South Asian. He was also the only one of the three to survive, although he lost vision in one eye.

Bhuiyan's parents had instilled in him the conviction that "forgiveness is the best policy."<sup>3</sup> Having recovered and rebuilt his life, he went on pilgrimage to Mecca with his mother in 2009, where he discerned a new purpose for his life. Returning to the United States, Bhuiyan mounted a campaign to rescue his assailant from the death penalty, going so far as to sue then-Texas governor Rick Perry to stay the execution. "In Islam it says that saving one human life is the same as saving [all of humankind],"<sup>4</sup> he reflected. "Execution is not the solution here because we are not dealing with the root cause, which is hate."<sup>5</sup> Bhuiyan's bid was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, hours before the execution, he spoke to his attacker for the first time since the shooting: "I forgive you," he said, "and I do not hate you."<sup>6</sup>

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After all, forgiveness is miraculous in cases like these, isn't it? How can it be that people whose lives have been torn apart by cruelty and injustice can

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<sup>3</sup> [soundcloud.com/snapjudgment/this-an-eye-for-an-eye-for-an-eye](https://soundcloud.com/snapjudgment/this-an-eye-for-an-eye-for-an-eye).

<sup>4</sup> [wikipedia.org/wiki/Rais\\_Bhuiyan](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Rais_Bhuiyan).

<sup>5</sup> [soundcloud.com/snapjudgment/this-an-eye-for-an-eye-for-an-eye](https://soundcloud.com/snapjudgment/this-an-eye-for-an-eye-for-an-eye).

<sup>6</sup> [wikipedia.org/wiki/Rais\\_Bhuiyan](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Rais_Bhuiyan).

summon the will to forgive? I'm in awe, and I'm not sure that I could do the same, certainly not of my own accord.

Perhaps the greatest testimony to the grace of God is the grace that survivors of brutality occasionally bestow on their brutalizers. **The power of grace, when we truly internalize it, is to claim us for a gracious purpose: to overcome hate and violence and tyranny. Of course, forgiveness does not erase all consequences;<sup>7</sup> neither does Jesus' insistence on perpetual forgiveness invite perpetual abuse. Instead, a commitment to ongoing forgiveness within the church – and within the human community – guards against self-destruction.** “Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing,” Archbishop Tutu affirms. “It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future.”<sup>8</sup>

On a personal level, it may feel like defeat. But, forgiveness does not mean to deny your pain; it's not self-erasure. On the contrary, to forgive is to release yourself from your offender's emotional grip; it's freedom from the shackles of your past. So to that end, may the God who is “full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” grant you the grace to forgive, friends, even and perhaps especially when it's most difficult, both for your sake and for the life of the world.

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<sup>7</sup> Schifferdecker.

<sup>8</sup> *The Sunflower*, 268.