

Sermon – Sunday, September 17, 2023

Rev. Randi

I want to share a story told by Rabbi Harold Kushner.

He says, "A woman in my congregation comes to see me. She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She says to me, "Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?"

I answered her, "I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't; it was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting yourself."

Forgiveness is an essential spiritual practice. God has commanded that we forgive others, and medical science tells us that forgiveness improves our physical and mental health. Learning to forgive keeps us healthy and open to the life God intends. Many of us struggle to forgive and – like Peter – want to limit how often we'll forgive someone. Yet, our spiritual, mental, and physical health depends on continually forgiving others. However, the exchange between Peter and Jesus is about more than just personal forgiveness. It's also about forgiveness and accountability in the context of a faith community. Peter is asking the question about how often he should forgive fellow church members. Peter asks that question just after Jesus has delivered his discourse about what to do when a member of the church sins against you. We read that passage last week. It said:

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.* But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

We all know that we sometimes get our feelings hurt in church. Someone says or does something that offends us. We are on one side of a schism in the church, and someone on the other side says something mean to us. Sometimes, we even experience trauma in the church.

Jesus is setting out a system where both the victim and the sinner receive grace yet are also held accountable – or, as one of my ministry colleagues says, we are held "able."ⁱ The victim is "held able" to go through the process Jesus speaks of when someone in the church has hurt them. They go first to the person who hurt them. If that doesn't help, they take others with them. If that still doesn't help, they bring their concern to the whole church. The victim also is "held able" to forgive the wrong.

On the other hand, the church community holds the offender as "able" to repent and turn their life around. The church community ensures the offender hears and responds to the victim's hurt. The community is also there to protect the victim from being repeatedly hurt by the same person over and over again. The church offers support and compassion to the victim because of their hurt. It also supports the offender in making amends and changing their life. Indeed, the church holds them "able" or accountable.

Sometimes, the tendency in churches is to avoid dealing with conflicts that occur between members. The tendency is fine as long as the members quickly resolve their disputes. However, schisms develop if the church community fails to intervene in long-term conflicts between individuals. These schisms significantly damage the church and its ministries. God calls us as community members to work together to heal any rifts quickly. If an offender is unwilling to change their ways, the church must act to convince them to do so for the benefit of the injured party and the whole church.

Forgiveness is a commandment from God. Forgiving each other within the church community is even more significant. Indeed, we are never to stop forgiving members of our congregation who hurt us, no matter how many times they mess up. However, the church community also has a responsibility. The community must do some binding and loosing. They must be sure to hear the voice of the injured. They also must hold the offender "able" to change and do whatever is necessary to urge this change.

ⁱ The Very Rev. Twila Smith, dean of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Paul, Buffalo