

In the final scene, the servant is back where he started. He is trapped by his own actions. The consequence of his transgression is great. He returns to a tortured life and the impossible task of repaying the debt that is owed the Master.

And then the Gospel provides an epilogue as Jesus turns back to Peter, and to all of his followers, with a clear message----“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart”. Jesus teaches that once the monetary debt was reconciled, the servant still owed something to his neighbors. In Romans 13:8 we read "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another..."

So how well does the church pay back this debt of loving one another? We often have trouble letting go of long held grievances and differences. The first Scripture lesson from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome suggests some of the challenges of translating Christ's instructions into daily practice. Paul expresses keen awareness of some of the tensions that were percolating and threatening to boil over as people with different interpretations of Christ's message gathered as a community of faith. Some of the issues that divided the early church included what type of food and drink Christians should consume. In the context of defining what it means to be a community, Paul encourages members to surrender their self-righteous judgments of one another and instead leave final judgments to God. Through Christ, reconciliation can happen.

And yet the peaceable kingdom God envisions for us often seems so far from the world we live in. Front page newspaper stories of acts of terrorism, domestic violence, torture are a daily reality for many people in the world. As witnesses to or victims of injustice and suffering we may feel hopelessness or helplessness. The peace of Christ often feels unattainable and a distant dream.

I recently went to a panel discussion hosted by a non-profit agency, New Story Leadership. The forum was entitled, *Reaching beyond Our Differences: Views from the Next Generation of Leaders in the Middle East*. Young adults from Palestine and Israel journeyed to the U.S. for a summer of living and working together as an action for change and an opportunity for new understanding. One goal of the forum was to provide a space for Americans to hear these young people share their stories and hopes for peace. These messengers of peace shared how grateful they were to come together face to face at a common table to learn about each other.

One Palestinian man told a story, a parable about a man who sought to understand the difference between heaven and hell. He was escorted by a guide to both heaven and hell. In both places an abundant table of food was set. People, without arms or hands were sitting at the table. The citizens of hell sat hungry and unable to move. The people in heaven used their mouths to pick up eating utensils and were feeding one another. The lesson shared: heaven can be achieved on earth if those at the table work together so that all may be fed. The young people from the Middle East, by coming together to a common table were discovering ways of letting go of old understandings of their neighbor and were beginning to embrace a new, more hopeful narrative.

I believe that the essential message of Matthew's Gospel and Paul's letter to the Roman Church is the affirmation of faith that with God all things are possible. By Christ's example and God's grace the church can progress toward letting go of intolerant attitudes and self-righteous judgment of others. We can accept with gratitude the power of God's forgiveness and can strive to share that gift with others. We can open our hearts for a new understanding of God's will on earth as it is in heaven and are freed to become all that God has created us to be. Easier said than done I know. Yet, forgiveness and reconciliation is an essential practice for the healthy life of the church.

Forgiveness is, according to Thomas G. Long,

"to the Christian life like breathing; constant and life-giving. What we breathe in from God's mercy we express to others. Inhale. Exhale. Forgive us, as we forgive; as we forgive, forgive us."¹ P. 71

I invite you now to take a deep breath, inhale God's mercy, and exhale and hear the words of Ted Loder from his collection of prayers entitled *Guerrillas of Grace*.

Let us pray:

O God, it is hard for us to let go, most times, and the squeeze we exert garbles us and gnarls others.

So, loosen our grip a bit on the good times, on the moments of sunlight and star shine and joy, that the thousand graces they scatter as they pass may nurture growth in us rather than turn to brittle memories.

Loosen our grip on those grudges and grievances we hold so closely that we may risk exposing ourselves to the spirit of forgiving and forgiveness that changes things and resurrects dreams and courage.

Loosen our grip on our fears that we may be released a little into humility and into an acceptance of our humanity ...

Loosen our grip on our own ways and words ... that letting go into the depths of silence and our own uncharted longing, we may find ourselves held by you and linked anew to all life in this wild and wondrous world you love so much so we may take to heart that you have taken us to heart.

¹ Excerpted from *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle* by Ted Loder

1 Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 71.