

Fear Not: Forgive January 15, 2017 Romans 13:8-10 and Matthew 18:15-20  
Resource: [The Book of Forgiving](#) by Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu REVISED

Prayer: Draw us into your love, Christ Jesus, and deliver us from fear.

This week I watched the movie Selma about the Civil Rights movement. Selma. Every time I learn about the Civil Rights movement, I marvel at the courage, strength, faith, determination and perseverance of African American Christians, and citizens, and people of conscience. People who marched, prayed, walked, sang, sat at lunch counters, for the justice of equal rights. Today is the birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He would have been 88. This month, as we listen to God's message to Fear Not, we can continue to learn from Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement. This movement was grounded in faith and while people were certainly afraid as they protested, they did not act from fear. Instead, people learned to act from love. God's love which is completely different. God's love says Love your enemies. God's Love says pray for those who persecute you. God's love says turn the other cheek, walk another mile, give away your coat. God's love says "thou shalt not kill." These are God's words and this is the love that Dr. King learned, believed, trusted, taught, and practiced. God named Jesus comes to create God's beloved community - people who love God so much that we commit to function by God's rules - community ahead of individual, active instead of passive, love in place of hate, love instead of fear. It's this kind of love, God's perfect love, that casts out fear. It's this kind of love, God's perfect love, that brings people together in peaceful protest. It's this kind of love, God's perfect love, that makes it possible to do the next right thing even though we also feel afraid. In a society with such deep divisions, divisions which have also taken up residence among Christians, how can we be and become a beloved community that thinks with the mind of Christ, loves with the heart of Christ, and serves with the hands of Christ? God named Jesus shows us and gives us the words.

When God named Jesus was on the cross suffering as he died, he looked at the people around him, the soldiers who were doing their job, the religious leaders who feared Rome, his mother, his followers, and God said, "Forgive them..." Forgive. Them.

Notice what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say, "Forgive them if ..." He doesn't say, "Forgive them when..." On the cross, God says, "Forgive them." What reason does Jesus give? "They don't know what they are doing." In his extreme suffering, Jesus is full of compassion for those who killed him. Jesus is full of compassion for those who succumbed to the crowd mentality. Jesus is full of compassion for those who didn't say anything and in their silence became complicit in his execution. Jesus didn't qualify his forgiveness. He didn't withhold his forgiveness. He gave it freely, a gift of grace, of love, lavished on hurting wounded people.

From the cross, God shows us that there is nothing that can't be forgiven. There is no one beyond forgiveness. (Tutu, p. 5) A community that doesn't intentionally practice forgiveness can at best hobble along, weighed down by unspoken resentment and divided by unresolved conflict. It's the same for an individual. Like an untreated infection, unresolved hurt grows inside a person, a festering into a painful wound. Forgiveness is the antibiotic. Only forgiveness can free an individual and a community to thrive. Forgiveness is this important.

To learn the practice of forgiveness, we need to be clear about what forgiveness is not. (Tutu p. 33-39) Forgiveness is not weakness. Forgiveness does not replace justice. People will always live with the consequences of their actions. The thief on the cross was forgiven and still he died. Forgiveness is not forgetting. It doesn't ignore or deny the wrongs. This is so important for people of faith and conscience to hear! Forgiveness is not forgetting. it does not ignore or deny the wrongs. The other thing that struck me as I watched Selma was the rhetoric of hate from Governor George Wallace and Bull Connor and people along the bridge. The words of hate and violence sound like any talk - from politicians to people to pastors to anyone - that is based in fear. Words of hate and violence sound the same from generation to generation, in every culture and context. Forgiveness does not ignore this! Forgiveness says I will act from love and not hate. From forgiveness people of faith and conscience gain strength and courage to act

for justice. Dr. King said, "The time is always right to do the right thing." To do. To act. Forgiveness names the suffering, out loud and frees people to do the next right thing. Finally, forgiveness is not easy, it has to be broken down into bite size pieces, to learn and to practice.

Bishop Desmond Tutu writes about the "Fourfold Path" as a way to break forgiveness down into manageable parts. Tell the story. Name the hurt. Grant forgiveness. Renew or release the relationship. Four steps that have the essence of the steps Jesus teaches in Matthew 18.  
(The Book of Forgiving by Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu)

When we tell the story, we begin to get back our dignity. (p. 71) This is practicing Matthew 18 - If someone wrongs you, first go to the person and tell them. Telling our story through words, music, art allows us make sense of what happened. Telling the story may happen many times, as we are able to remember the larger story that defines who we are. No matter what happens to us, we are first and always a beloved child of God. God loves us. God accepts us. God forgives us. So we can also love, accept and forgive others. We can love, accept, and forgive ourselves. We can love, forgive and accept God, who many times does not act the way that we would like or the way that we've been taught.

Tell the Story and Name the hurt. Hurt that is not address grows bitterness in our heart and mind. It is hard, to feel and name uncomfortable emotions. But to feel hurt, anger, resentment is to be human. Forgiveness frees us from these uncomfortable emotions.

Tell the Story. Name the Hurt. Grant Forgiveness. "How many times?" Peter asked. "As many as it takes," Jesus answered. 70 x 7 - in other words, forgive until it's forgiven. Dr. King said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude." I forgive you. I forgive you. Say it until you mean it. Pray it until you trust it.

The Fourth step on the path of Forgiveness is a choice, a decision. As forgiveness unfolds, a person decides to either renew or release the relationship. This happens in all kinds of community. In a marriage, a family, a small group, a large church. People forgive over and over. And sometimes, sadly, the wrong, the hurt, the injustice is too much, and a person feels that for the good of his soul, he must go to another place. You can forgive a friend whose wronged you. And, you may decide to release the friendship. That is ok.

This is the four fold path of forgiveness. It is what Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement practiced. To Tell the story of the effects of racism - the brutality, the poverty, the lies. To Name the hurts - the humiliation, despair, disappointment, betrayal. To grant forgiveness - not to forget the hurt and not to excuse the wrong - but to grant forgiveness in deciding to act from love instead of hate, to fear not. And to renew the relationship over and over - the relationship with this country, and with other people of faith.

This week I've been following the news regarding Mother Emmanuel AME. This past week, the person who murdered the Emmanuel Nine was given the death penalty. For three days, witnesses and family members told their story of what happened, named their hurt, and many times, not every time, but some people said, "I forgive you." One person, the widower of Myra Thompson said, "I forgave him, and I'm not going to take that back, ever."

I hope this would make Dr. King proud. I hope all people of faith and conscience can learn from this witness. Hope is what we will talk about next week.