The Fifteenth Sunday of Pentecost

Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:(1-7), 8-13
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

“God has arranged everything in the universe in consideration of everything else.”

Hildegard of Bingen

We begin with a deep breath, which we hold for a moment, and release. Another Deep breath, as we leave the pressure of the outside world and enter our own silence, and relax.

Amen.

“And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (Matthew 18:35)

This has been a very difficult sermon to write. I don’t know why. I do know that this part of Matthew’s Gospel stopped me in my tracks. Seriously, how can we go forward with this sword hanging over our heads? Tortured? Our “heavenly Father” will torture us if we don’t forgive our brother or sister? Stopped right there, in my tracks.

This is the God of my childhood, the God who had me up sobbing in the middle of the night, begging for mercy and direction. I was 9. Yes, 9 and living in terror of a vengeful God who would torture me if I misbehaved. Those of you who grew up in the Catholic church prior to Vatican II or in any number of fundamental religious institutions, understand this image.

I’m not sure I believe this idea any more – about a God who would torture her beloved, and we are the Beloved – any more than I believe in the existence in a hell after death. I wonder what the Jesus seminar would say about this passage – did Jesus really say this? This image of torture does not fit with the loving Holy Mystery Jesus taught or the Divine Beloved taught by medieval or modern mystics.

Hildegard told us, “The mystery of God hugs you in its all-encompassing arms.”

Julian said, “And so have all things their beginning by the love of God. In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.”

Richard Rohr wrote, “You yourself are a travelling ark of the covenant; (pg 113)”

Sit with that one for a minute!

I would go so far as to say that I not convinced that it is a God who forgives. I know that sounds controversial. I think forgiveness is our job, our responsibility. Divine Love, the connector between us, is a constant, to me, a constant flow of love that just does not include any need to be forgiven. But that is me. I believe this idea of a vengeful God is one, first, that was imposed on us to keep us in control, and second, as something we have imposed on the Holy Mystery in an attempt to keep ourselves separate, in order to avoid our magnificence, think “traveling ark of the covenant.” I know this is cage rattling thinking. I know it can make you uncomfortable even hearing it. I apologize for that discomfort. I am not saying that we don’t need to forgive or be forgiven. It’s just that I don’t think it’s God that does it. I believe our need to forgive is vital to our well-being, our mental health, our physical health, our spiritual health. Grievances are deadly.

How do we forgive when we live in times of peril, confusion, and emotional trauma? We live in a time when rage and ancient grievance are trending. We cannot open any form of social media and not become quickly overwhelmed by it. It covers our 24/7 news cycle, with one rancid story after another. Even Mother Nature is piling up one grievance after another with hurricanes, flooding, and out of control wild fires. We can scarcely drive down the street without experiencing road rage, either our own or that of the driver behind us. North Korea fires a missile over Japan, and our president threatens “fire and fury like the world has never known.” As I said, grievances are deadly and I am not immune to their effect.

I watched the interview Rachael Maddow did with Hillary Clinton on Thursday. It was quite painful, to be honest. As a friend said, “We could have had that.” She was brilliant, so knowledgeable and so human. She shared her vulnerability, which, maybe, she should have done during the campaign. Who knows? I remember thinking, as I watched, here is this bright, articulate, educated, poised, amazing woman – and what happened? She is a former first lady of Arkansas, a former first lady of the US, a former Secretary of State. She’s written 6 books, including memoirs, a book about the White House, a children’s book about the letters her pets received, and *It Takes a Village,* her thoughts about children. She founded organizations to help child healthcare and worked to improve the education of special needs kids, first in Arkansas and then nationally. She worked to make the world a better place. I am at a loss. Even still, in defeat, others continue to berate her. I feel cheated out of what could have been.

As part of my preparation this week, I read and viewed several documentaries about Hildegard of Bingen. Brilliant woman, articulate, knowledgeable. She had visions, even as a young child. Some believe that the visions actually were not visions in the technical sense, but, rather, the auric visual field that comes with migraines. Of course, that does not explain the actual vision that came with the auric experience. She felt her visions were guidance from God. Visions that she later illustrated and explained with deep theology. She was one of the early Creation mystics. She was a musician and wrote over 2,000 pieces of music, 75 of which are still sung today. She was a healer and wrote a book on medicinal herbs. She was a traveling preacher, founded her own abbey, counseled and advised and even challenged the church establishment. For this, she and her members were punished by the removal of all music and singing in their cloister. She stood up to this decision and won back permission for her music. I had no idea. I knew nothing about Hildegard until recent years. How could my education have been so lacking as to not include this amazing woman? I feel cheated.

Katherine Goble, Dorothy Vaughn, Mary Jackson – Hidden figures. Three amazing, brilliant, innovative, and history making women. Katherine Goble – mathematician who was a key figure at NASA during our early flights into space. Her story is compelling. Dorothy Vaughn – taught herself and her staff the programming language of FORTRAN and headed a computer division at Langley. Mary Jackson – NASA’s first black female engineer. Of course, their stories have been capsulized (pun intended) in the movie *Hidden Figures*. Their struggle, their persistence, their brilliance is inspiring. I was a young teen during the “space race”. I had no idea any women worked for NASA. It never even crossed my mind as a possibility. The face of NASA was a white guy. I remember leaving the theater, stunned and rather angry. Cheated again. Cheated from the knowledge that women were out there doing amazing things. How could that knowledge have changed my life, if I’d known?

One of my nieces got married last weekend. We weren’t invited. An old grievance, rooted in, I think, some ancient grievances, got in the way. I had heard she was getting married, a small civil ceremony in San Francisco. What I did not know was who was invited. When I saw the pictures on Facebook of the reception, I felt like I’d been stabbed in the heart. The pain was and remains so intense. I thought we had repaired the rift over the past few years. She was so very loving and supportive during my brother’s dying and death. I thought we had moved on to forgiveness and healing. I did not realize the grievance still lived on in this beautiful young woman with so much life ahead of her. I fear for her health, mental and spiritual, for the harm that holding on to this grievance will do to her in the long run. I felt cheated, prevented from being present, with her, on this day of great joy.

So many grievances. Mine, yours, my nieces, your sister’s, your mother’s, your neighbor’s, your friend’s. Holding on to a grievance is very costly. Every grievance is torture, torturing ourselves as we hope to cast pain and suffering on that which has grieved us. If we succeed, then we both live *unhappily* ever after. Every grievance is an attack against yourself. When did we lose our ability to have patience with another’s failings?

A grievance is, really, just a thought, a thought I’m having about a person or event. Just a thought. A thought I carry with me, causing pain and injury. My grievance only attacks me. I carry it around like a grenade hoping to inflict injury, only to destroy my own peace of mind and happiness. Every time I bring up a grievance, I am deciding to suffer. That which has caused the grievance has gone on with his/her/its life while I continue to carry around the suffering. While I hold a grievance, I am withholding my light from that which I must forgive.

“We cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a home. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light.” - Hildegard of Bingen

Forgiveness gives us back to ourselves. Forgiveness allows us to see our own light, to share that light with others. While I hold a grievance, I am withholding my light from that which I must forgive. Forgiveness gives me wings. Forgiveness is a way of seeing, of take into you beyond your ego, beyond your need for vengeance. Forgiveness can switch you from fear to love, from pain to peace, from past to present, and from despair to freedom.

I am learning about how to forgive. Maybe this is something that happens later in life. Maybe we have to have done our own damage to others, built our own library of grievances, seen the effect of our own mistakes, anger, rage before we can come to terms with what has been done to us. I have learned that forgiveness is about allowing, about opening my heart to the possibility that I do not know the entire story, that, perhaps, there is a lesson to be learned from what happened to me. I’ve learned that forgiveness is about willingness, willingness to step out of my small world, my small reactive mind, into a broader space of understanding. I am not always innocent. I am also a participant of the story. Allowing and willingness are keys that help us move into a place where forgiveness can happen. Jesus says 77 times. I say it’s probably more like 100,000 times in our lifetime that we are called to forgive, called to ask for forgiveness. That number may even be higher. Forgiveness is not impossible, in spite of what we experience in the world.

Learning to forgive is about allowing, about willingness, about intention. Let’s practice.

Get comfortable.

Take a deep breath.

Close your eyes.

*What would it be like to give and receive total peace through forgiveness?*

*What would it be like to experience the freedom of forgiveness?*

*What would it be like to just let go of any need for vengeance?*

*What would it be like to bring your unique light of peace to your world?*

*Be open to the allowing, the willingness to give and receive forgiveness.*

Amen.

Reference:

Rohr, R. (2016). *The Divine dance: The Trinity and your transformation.* New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House