Three years ago, I was invited to attend the Preaching Excellence Program sponsored by the Episcopal Preaching Foundation outside Richmond Virginia. The focus of the program was “Preaching Forgiveness”. Episcopal seminarians and noted preachers from around the country , including PB Curry, spent three days together pondering the notion of forgiveness, the practice of seeking God’s voice in the midst of our relationships.

One homily I remember so vividly was preached by Kathleen Walker, a seminarian from Virginia Theological Seminary. Kathleen, an African American woman, spoke of the deaths of two black men, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, who were killed in interactions with police. Two deaths in two days, all within a week of our gathering at the conference. She wondered aloud how we should respond. She worried aloud about her family’s safety, her son, her husband, her father, her nephew, her grandson.

At this time in 2017, there rose up peaceful marches in Dallas, Tx, where protesters and police walked side by side. And then shots rang out and in the end five officers had lost their lives and two civilians were shot. I recall how the blame game moved into high gear at that time. And the eventual result has been that we moved into separate camps, and the gaps between us continued to grow wider.

Three years later we are calling out more names of Black Americans lost and cities marking over a hundred days and nights of taking to the streets for justice. To quote Kathleen, *“We cannot live in a society where there is a culture that condones the gunning down black and brown people with little regard for us as human beings. Conversely, we cannot exist in a world where citizens continuously take aim at those sworn to protect us. How do we make sense of this madness?”*

Madness is certainly what we seem to encounter in the parable Jesus offers us this day. What begins as a story of restoration, turns to retribution in an instant. A king who forgives the mountainous debt of a slave, only to have that same man turn to a fellow servant who owes a lesser, though still substantial debt, and fail to offer mercy. Then the king rescinds his mercy and sentences the ungrateful slave to torture in payment for his inability to pass on the mercy granted to him. Madness indeed!

I’m reminded of Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount: *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”*

*An eye for an eye…*

*An eye for an eye* is one of those phrases that we hear used when revenge and retaliation are on the menu. In the ancient world, it was legal to take revenge upon one who took your eye by exacting the same or worse injury on your enemy.

In fact, you might even be within your rights to take both their eyes and those of their family members as well. So, although Leviticus and Exodus and Deuteronomy all make reference to retaliatory justice, this *eye for and eye*, *tooth for a tooth* was really meant to bring *limits* upon revenge, allowing compensation, like for like, only for what had been taken, and no more, thus preventing escalating cycles of violence and personal vendettas.

Still, it sounds very brutal to our ears. But, before we shake our heads and say that seeking revenge or retributive justice does not hold a significant influence in our time and place, perhaps Jesus’ words are calling us to pay closer attention to the narratives that take place around us, and to become conscious of how we may contribute to them, for example, in the debates surrounding mass incarceration and movements concerning racial reconciliation, or in the deliberate sabotage of peaceful gatherings with violence and mayhem.

Retribution, retaliation, revenge, these words are far more prevalent, more familiar to our ears, to our present culture, that what we are asked to consider today.

Forgiveness. For the past weeks in our scripture Jesus has been focused on forgiveness. Forgive over and over. Jamie spoke of this last week. Endless forgiveness.

Peter asks how often he should forgive a “member of the Church”, is actually not about a church member (there was no church in Jesus lifetime), but is referring to someone considered as a sibling, a close community member. Jesus’ focus is on the health of the community- for individuals and the collective members of family in the broadest sense….the human family.

Henri Nouwen tells us, *“Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.”*

In Jesus words to Peter on this day we hear God’s desire for us to be in relationship with each other in community, and to be there in the knowledge and love of God. In Jesus’ words there is recognition that humans are just that, human. In our humanity we are pulled away, distracted by many shiny objects that call out for our false devotion. And in the process, we are pulled from each other and from the God that wants only for us to love as we are loved.

One of my favorite books is *Forgiven and Forgiving* by Episcopal priest and seminary professor L. William Countryman. In it he writes about the amazing generosity of God who *“showers us with forgiveness even before any repentance on our part.”* Countryman asserts that rather than thinking of forgiveness as a vehicle of denial by which we can shut the door on the past –“forgive and forget”, or “wiping the slate clean”- we might see that God is offering us the gift of forgiveness as a foundation upon which to build the future.

*“In fact,”* he asserts, *there is no way of erasing the past, and we always carry our past with us into our future. The question is not whether we carry it- but how we carry it- how we interpret it and build with it….We can drag the past as a ball and chain weighting us down, or bring it along with us a building material to create a larger and more generous future….We can play a part in God’s great project of redeeming the past and creating from it the life of the age to come. The means by which we do this is forgiveness. Forgiveness is what turns past wrong into future possibility.”*

Paul today addresses the community of Romans calling for unity. One group deeply connected to the customs and practices and recognition of times and events sacred to them, and newer believers who feel few ties to those expressions of community. As Paul tries to discourage their judging each other, he invites them to resist seeing the differences as impediments to relationship.

Seeking unity can be tricky, especially if we only see it as drawing in those with differing views to align with ours. I am often aware that when I hear calls for unity, my response is often, “If only those people would believe.. and do… as I do, the world would be alright.” Working for unity requires self-reflection in order to be genuine. Otherwise it can be end up as harmful, seeking only to function in the service of our own personal comfort and maintaining the status quo of unbalanced power, rather than yielding blessed healing, safety and compassion.

Our desire for true relationship must become deeply rooted in how we know and connect and grow with each other as God’s beloved people. God becomes the healthful triangulation through which all relationship is mediated. Accepting our part in relationship, becoming willing, even in small ways, to see ourselves through another’s eyes, through God’s eyes, and to acknowledge the image of God in the person that stands on the opposite side of the street, is the beginning of reconciliation of one heart to another. It is forward movement, a sacred act of restorative healing to a place where people in conflict come together toward meaningful change.

So, Jesus, how often do we have to forgive? Seven times, seventy times, seventy umpteen times? His answer to Peter (and to us) is to stop counting each time a chance for forgiveness arises as if it were a unique and distinct act. This is the stuff of living together, and we will be imperfect in our efforts, and perhaps Jesus is saying *just make a habit of it.*

And as always, I am reminded that we do not ever move through this business of living alone. Paul says it today. *“The Lord is able.”*

When we doubt that we can make a difference, the Lord is able. The Lord lifts us up.

When the past feels like a weight on our heart, the Lord is able. The Lord lifts us up.

When our impatience causes us to lose faith in the future, the Lord is able. The Lord lifts us up.

When we falter in forgiveness, the Lord is able. The Lord lifts us up.

The Lord is able. The Lord will lift us up. Again, and again, and again. AMEN.