

Repentance and forgiveness and community by Margreta Silverstone

In this Easter season, we are reminded of the various appearances Jesus made to his disciples, the lessons for today account for two – one along the Lake of Tiberias and the other to Paul. As has been already identified by Marjory and Kate in the previous weeks, the stories of Jesus' appearances are enlightening in the ways that the experience transforms the participants. These transformations are possible in the middle of great vulnerability. The stories today share these elements as well.

During Lent, Brenda offered that she was preaching the sermon she needed to hear herself. I think that I am doing that today. I stand in need of a sermon about repentance and forgiveness and community. I will be quoting a little from a book by Miroslav Volf entitled *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. I will donate it to the Seeker's library after the service.

Transformation of Repentance

In last week's Gospel account of the appearance of Jesus, Jesus told his disciples to wait and breathed on them. However, some of them seemed to have gotten tired of waiting. Half of them are back to fishing. Maybe they were doing this as a mindless diversion from waiting, like someone knitting in the doctor's waiting room. Alternatively, maybe, more like me many years ago when we had some long federal government furloughs – I was quilting. With the furlough, while I did not know when to expect to go back to work, I did have a sense of what I was going to. Since I had faith that at some point I would be called back to my work, I used my time creatively.

These disciples did not have that luxury, it was all unknown, so they may have sought out the comfort of a familiar task while they waited. I am not sure if God was trying to tell them that this was not what they should be about though. The lack of fish that they had caught that morning prior to their encounter with Jesus could be an odd reminder. Yet, Jesus asks or tells them to cast their nets on the other side and then they catch so many fish that the nets start to tear. Peter figures out that this is Jesus and goes quickly to meet him.

After they have had a little breakfast, Jesus brings up a topic with Peter. This has to be a tough moment for Peter. While Peter loves Jesus and rushes to meet him, Peter does not mention his guilt about the denial/betrayal. What does someone say after having failed (or sinned) so badly? Peter denied knowing Jesus. He swore to it. Then, after doing that three times, he encountered Jesus before the crucifixion and Jesus gave him a knowing look. Now, Peter wants to pick up the pieces of his relationship with Jesus, but is probably too afraid to bring up the topic of his behavior that night.

I have done much the same at times. Like Peter, I do not really want to remember when I have failed so fully. It is very easy for me to commit little acts that cause this, but I am capable of large ones too. A simple example, sometimes Oslin likes to throw things: balls, books, rubber ducks, food. There is some trigger in me that can explode after one too many of these throwing incidents. One level of discipline that we use is to slap his hand and say, "Pao Pao." At other times, I lift him up from wherever he is, I place him on the step going upstairs and then I give him a time out. Sometimes, my anger puts him on that step with more force than is necessary. He and I both end up in tears. Another time, I missed a blessing event to which I had been invited and said that I would come, resulting in a fracture in the relationship. At another time, I misinterpreted a friend's statement and, rather than seek clarification, I let my imagination run wild

and caused confusion.

Repenting is not easy work. "I am too ashamed of the wrongdoing I've committed to repent, too afraid of the consequences that may befall me," wrote Miroslav Volf. Ditto for me.

If the greatest command Jesus gave us was to love God and to love our neighbors, then actions and inactions that do not further this are, to use an old-fashioned word, sin. The actions that I have done or have not done (and should have) which break my relationships to others and to God are sins. I want to hide my sins. Moreover, I can be creative about how I hide them. As Miroslav noted, "We usually not only refuse to admit the wrongdoing and to accept guilt, but seem neither to detest the sin committed nor feel very sorry about it." He notes, "One of sin's most notable features is that it unfailingly refuses to acknowledge itself as sin."

How do we find the power to repent? How do we find the means to recover from sin and move forward? The gift that Jesus offers in this encounter with Peter is the gift of forgiveness and love. It is a gift that Jesus has already been living with Peter. Jesus has been encountering and loving his disciples, reassuring them of his love. Jesus finally addresses the brokenness now.

"Peter, do you love me?" asks Jesus. Certainly, Peter is aware that Jesus is recalling the incidents of his betrayal. Jesus chooses to follow the great commands himself in the way that he treats Peter. I would easily envision myself reminding Peter of his failings, but Jesus does not do that. In the face of gentle love, with vulnerability and honesty, Peter replies that yes, he does love Jesus and admits that Jesus knows the depths (and limits) of his love. Three times Jesus asks roughly the same question. Each time, Jesus offers Peter the chance to repent with dignity. He can rebuild the relationship that he has with Jesus and with God. He does not have to name

the specific instance; he has to recover from his wrong.

Sometimes, when we want to deny that we have committed a sin or we simply cannot bring up the topic to confess it, we may find someone who can mirror Jesus, who gently and lovingly reminds us of it, bring it to our attention and offer us the opportunity to repent. Sometimes, we may have to repent without such a loving, forgiving recipient. Oslin both is and is not capable of being such a mirror of Jesus. Yet, I must repent my anger against my son, because I have done wrong. I have sinned. I have to repent failing to appear at the blessing event, failing to honor my relationship to this friend.

I find the response that Jesus gives to each of Peter's responses illuminating. "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." I don't fully understand why Jesus does this. I do not understand why he does not say, "Yes, I know you love me and you screwed up and everything is forgiven now."

Nevertheless, I think that somehow simply stating that everything is forgiven is not enough. Sin has broken the relationship between two people. One may offer forgiveness; one may repent. The relationship still stands in an odd place and may not be fully healed or mended.

Miroslov speaks to this odd place,

"Forgiveness places us on the boundary between enmity and friendship, between exclusion and embrace. It tears down the wall of hostility that wrongdoing erects, but it does not take us into the territory of friendship...A wrongdoing has made a serious dent in a relationship, maybe even totaled it. We forgive in hope that it will elicit repentance and restitution, and that forgiveness will mend and restore the relationship."

Jesus points the way for Peter to mend and restore the relationship. Jesus identifies the restitution that is still needed. The restitution is service. After Peter's confession, Jesus calls him to feed and tend others. Jesus' forgiveness asks Peter carry God's love forward and live that love in relationship to the world and others. We know, from the history of Christianity, that Peter did carry the love forward.

In the moments when I have repented and sought forgiveness, I found that healing the relationship takes time and more than just the words. In addition to their forgiving me, the healing of the relationship may take my acting in service to the needs of the one that I have wronged. Sometimes that service has been very specific, like caring for Oslin's needs. However, sometimes it has been service conducted in quiet and secret. The service, done in this way, gently heals my heart and restores my love towards the ones I have wronged.

Transformation of Forgiveness

We can turn now to the other encounter in the readings for the week, this one, in Acts. It primarily recounts the appearance of Jesus to Saul. However, it also recounts an appearance to Ananias; it is this appearance that I hope to consider.

This is the only record of Ananias' involvement in the conversion of Saul/Paul. Paul never mentions him in the other times that he writes of his experience. As the narrative of Luke identifies, Saul was a nasty guy. He was actively rooting out all the followers of Jesus. On a trip between Jerusalem and Damascus, Jesus appears to Saul, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" That is probably as close to confronting Saul with his sin as anything. Then Jesus tells Saul to go and wait and blinds him too.

Then Jesus appears to Ananias and tells him to go find Saul.

Ananias knows about Saul and he is immediately afraid. I can easily imagine this dialogue, "I've heard about this guy, how much evil he has done in Jerusalem and we've heard that he has authority from the chief priests to capture anyone who invokes Jesus' name."

If I was Ananias, I think I would be terrified. I am being asked to go to an enemy, to someone who has the power to ruin my life. This would be nearly on the scale of going to see Seung-Hui Cho or Osama bin Ladin. I would fear for my own safety.

I do not know how often you end up meeting Jesus in a vision and having him ask you to go face an enemy or wrongdoer and do what God wants. My direct experiences of such are limited.

Yet, God gives me the power to confront evil. Jesus gave to Ananias, and by example of the story to me, this type of power. My trust in a God who loves me can lead me to speak truth to evil and wrongdoing. However, I do not do often and, when I do this, I know my strength to do it is in knowing that I am not alone. It is the stories of transformation in the scriptures and the stories of other Christians since that time, that give me strength to accomplish this. It is with gratitude and love that I know we follow Jesus, who did all of this himself and continues to live and encourage me.

God does not just ask me to confront evil, God asks me to forgive it. Here I struggle. I think, at some level, I understand forgiveness when I have to forgive the person who has wronged me. The lines of failure and forgiveness are relatively clear. That does not mean I find it easy to do.

Sometimes, I do not really want to forgive the person; I want them to pay for their actions. Sometimes, I want to rub their noses in the wrongdoing. This, in effect, really does not forgive them. Oslin was "helping" with the dishwasher and he broke the handle off a cup. We still use the cup, broken

handled as it is, and sometimes remind him of the fact that he broke the handle on the cup. We remind him of it mostly when he tries to "help" with the dishwasher again. I do not think that we have really forgiven him if our actions in this regard are considered. I broken a cup's handle too, many years ago. We use that cup to hold pens near the phone. It is a reminder of brokenness and yet is still beautiful and useful and I am not reminded to stay away from the dishwasher because of it.

Sometimes, I want to show off how "good" I am in forgiving someone else. If I tell stories about how I forgave the person to others, I make myself out to be a saint and discredit the wrongdoer to others. I am not a saint. While in a specific situation, the other person may have done wrong; I can point to times when I have failed too, and maybe even failed them. Discrediting the wrongdoer to others does not demonstrate love for them; it can cause brokenness between that person, my wrongdoer and the hearer of my story. This action, that lack of love, is a sin as well.

Sometimes, while I can say that I forgive, I find it difficult to live forgiveness. I find it difficult to get back to the place of friendship with the person. In part, it may be that I really did not offer the person a way into service or restitution. In part, it may be that I cannot forget the pain and trust them.

Jesus' encounter with Ananias asks of Ananias to risk a lot. He asks him to risk his life and go meet Saul. Jesus asks Ananias to trust him. Nevertheless, it does not stop there. In effect, Jesus is asking Ananias to be the one to relay Jesus' message to forgiveness and service to Paul. Ananias is acting towards Paul in the same manner as Jesus did with Peter. Rather than confront Paul with his sin, Ananias laid his hands on Paul, healed (or forgave him), and baptized him.

Jesus asks Ananias to forgive Saul. That forgiveness is both a reflection of God's forgiveness and, likely, Ananias'

forgiveness too. In this encounter, Ananias is transformed to be the agent of God in enacting forgiveness. He is being asked to risk forgiving someone who seems nearly unforgivable. Jesus asks Ananias to tend his sheep by giving the gift of forgiveness. Saul seemed like an evil guy; yet God can and does work through Saul. Ananias has to trust that even this person can and is someone whom God loves.

I know that I do not view the forgiveness that I offer as being God's forgiveness, just my own. I do not know why I do not connect myself to this larger context. It may be because I do not always remember God's love and forgiveness towards me. If I knew and lived my life, every day, as being a totally loved and forgiven person, wouldn't that translate into a life spilling over with love and forgiveness for others? Shouldn't that translate into a life spilling over with love and forgiveness for others? Yet, somehow, I seem to be stingy with forgiveness.

Not only does Ananias have to trust God to offer forgiveness, he also has to trust Paul. This is hard to fathom. Why must Ananias trust Paul? Because God trusts. Because Jesus trusts. Because the service God expects as part of forgiving Peter, forgiving us, is trusting us to feed and tend those whom God loves.

Community Encouragement and Transformation

In Pat's class on theology, one of the questions that we worked on had to deal with the problem of evil. What do we want God's response to evil to be? Do we want God's tolerance? I shared in the class that I did not want God's tolerance; I wanted God's love. Because, when I look at the evil that is around me and I look at myself, I realize that I am capable of great evil, that it can easily live within me, despite my best efforts. When I stand in the place of evil in the question, it is my hope that God is love.

The Easter stories, the appearances of Jesus to the followers, are stories of God's love and presence and healing or forgiveness to us and through us. While the stories involve individuals, they take place within the context of community. We know Peter continued to serve and grow the church community. We have on record in Acts how Paul immediately contributed to the community in Damascus.

I understand why I must trust those who have wronged me, those who have sinned. Because I hope and pray and claim in faith God can trust me when I have failed, have sinned. I understand why I must trust those who have wronged me, those who have sinned. I hope and pray that you, you whom I have wronged, have misjudged, have dismissed in anger; that those whom I have sinned against may trust and forgive me.

I am grateful that we do have a God who knows we will fail but loves us anyway. I am grateful and need a community of faith that can remind me of my place in this larger story of our faith, can remind me of my failing and of God's abundant love and forgiveness, can remind me to continue repenting, forgiving, trusting, loving.