

We all have our “Where were you?” moment.

I was in a field at a camp near Colorado Springs, with several dozen freshmen students, nervous about the school year they were about to start. (I was nervous, too.)

Some of you may have stepped outside during your busy work day, Or pulled over to the shoulder of the road on your way to or from somewhere.

And some of you travelled hours to get to the right spot, and it probably took you twice as long to get home.

And depending on where you were, for three minutes your world was transformed.

Suddenly nature mattered more than anything else, and your deepest humanity was called forth.

The dozens of ways in which we divide ourselves disappeared for a precious few moments. It didn't matter who you voted for, who you love, where you were born, whether you eat vegetables or meat, or what bumper stickers were on your cars. (Ironically, Red-Staters travelled to Blue States, Blue-Staters to Red States, to get just the right perspective.)

And if you were in what we called totality, you probably heard cheers, gasps, laughter, and, for the first time in your life, you may have shed tears produced not by sorrow or Hallmark-brand joy, but by pure awe.

Such is the power of the moon, on a planet where, coincidentally, our source of light and energy is both 40 times bigger than, and 40 times farther away from us than, the graceful, mysterious, lesser source of light. And every once in a while, that mathematical oddity produces a

total eclipse of the sun. It's no wonder that primitive peoples worshipped the moon before the sun and earth: even the non-eclipse moonlight makes us glow brighter than we seem to shine during the day, where brightness makes our edges sharper, our blemishes more apparent.

On that magical August day, we got a sense of a transformed world that, for me, has come to represent the forgiving eye of God, where the mystery of the moon – and the mystery of grace and mercy – have the power to overtake even the mid-day sun.

Under the totality of God's forgiving, eclipsing eye, flaws and weaknesses are ironed out, and it doesn't matter who we are, what we have done (or what we have left undone) – In that eclipse world, we are part of the totality of creation, where birds, crickets, and even humans behave strangely, as if charmed by a good witch's spell. Forgiveness changes the world.

As we all know, though, that was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for most of us. And we also know, if we've seen videos online and weren't able to experience totality, that the difference between 96% eclipse and totality is – forgive the pun – like the difference between day and night.

And so it is with our human attempts at forgiveness. The fact that the word forgiveness shows up everywhere in our worship service - in the creed, in the confession, and in the Lord's Prayer, for a start - that fact should be enough to tell us how much we need the reminder not only that we need to forgive others, but that we deserve to be forgiven.

Now, on an average night, the moon is still mysterious, and it's still transformative. It may not cast that enchantment spell that we experience in the totality of the eclipse, but if we're on the lookout for

the moonlight, we can let it remind us how the gentle eclipsing eye of God must see us. And if we do that, our own forgiveness, though vastly inferior to God's, can transform our community, our world, and ourselves.

If we had read the Old Testament reading from Track 2 this morning, we would have read not of the parting of the Red Sea and the Israelites' flight from Egypt – itself a scene of moonlight redemption under the protecting light of God – but instead of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers. This is a true moonlight moment: after being sold into slavery by his brothers. (let me repeat that: *sold into slavery!!!*), revenge seems like the classic option, and it would have been, if this were a Greek tragedy or even another Bible story. But instead, Joseph weeps, his brothers weep, and mercy eclipses retribution. Joseph uses his power not to punish his brothers, but instead to provide for them and their little ones. (Coincidentally, this story became part of our meditation at Tuesday's vestry meeting, and our collective discussion saw Joseph's reunion with his family as a reminder of the celebrations we have experienced in this community recently: baptisms, harpsichord recitals, bluegrass concerts, funerals. And at the center of each of those celebrations was some kind of human connection.) Forgiveness changes the world.

Last year, a little poignant film called *Moonlight* eclipsed the louder, more glaringly obvious Oscar films, winning a historic Best Picture. It's a beautiful story of forgiveness, and if you've seen it you'll know that the title image bathes the whole film's mood.

By moonlight on a beach near Miami, Chiron, a young gay black man still trying to figure out what it means to be young or gay or black or a man – finds solace, comfort, and companionship with a sometime friend, sometime rival. Home life is not a sanctuary for Chiron. Neither is school, where he is bullied for his quietness and gentleness. But this

night feels like something different. Chiron and his friend understand each other here, and the moonlight reminds them of what an older relative once said: “Under the moonlight black boys look blue.” It’s a life-changing moment for Chiron, but it’s fleeting, and this night’s tranquility and safety do not last long. Chiron’s friend betrays him, and Chiron is forced to find harbor and stability in the same bad business that so many others before him had followed. Ten or fifteen years later, though, Chiron – hardened and jaded by life’s whims – gets a phone call from his old friend and traitor, and by moonlight he drives hours back to Miami to visit the all-night diner where his friend cooks. They share a meal and a bottle of wine under the neon glow of the restaurant’s sign, and all is – or seems to be – forgiven. Their late-night dinner is a Eucharistic feast of communion, confession, and reunion. (But how could Chiron forgive him, I remember thinking.) And that’s the point. Forgiveness doesn’t often make sense. Forgiving someone once for a horrible act is unnatural. It defies our human nature. These moonlight moments, where the creditor forgives debt, where the victim forgives perpetrator, and the powerless forgive the powerful. They’re hard to accept, and it sounds wrong even to say it out loud. When it happens, though, it changes the world. And we must remember that forgiveness is a two-way relationship.

Our feast of communion is a moonlight moment. The round communion host, lifted before the fraction like a full moon rising, makes me think of the totality of God’s eclipsing grace, transforming all of us in its presence. And when we each get a fragment of that whole wafer, we’re allowing God’s forgiveness to be part of our own outlook. Ideally, we would immediately be endowed with a kind of superhero power to see people transformed. If you’re like me, that doesn’t literally happen, but if we look for opportunities to practice that transformation, the mystery of that communion wafer starts to be apparent.

The sacrament of communion is, in the words of our Book of Common Prayer, a 'foretaste of that heavenly banquet,' or, to put it in other words, a sneak peek at a world eclipsed and transformed by grace and forgiveness.

For me, our communion feast also gives a context for the way that Jesus answers Peter's question in today's gospel.

For Peter, forgiving someone seven times would represent his imperfect view of totality, especially when forgiving once seems absurd. 7 days in creation represents total creation, and the number would have had symbolic and sacred sense for Peter. So to say 'as much as seven times' is, for Peter, to ask Jesus if he must always forgive. Translations differ on whether the number Jesus uses to convey how much we should forgive is 77 or 7 times 70. But either way, Jesus's answer is that we must multiply 'always' or 'infinity' by another 'always' or 'infinity'. 7 is total; 77 is ludicrously complete. And 7 times 70? Well, that's just preposterous. If 95% totality in an eclipse is nothing like totality – a mathematical impossibility – then maybe that's why we have to forgive so much. It is preposterous to forgive someone dozens of times for the same thing, but Peter's question leaves out the other part of the equation: how must someone else forgive me, you for the same offense? Our communion feast gives us the extra mystery ingredient of how to get to 77, or to 70 times 7, or to totality.

To seek and serve Christ in all persons is to see God in others, which is to see preposterous goodness in others. But there's another dimension at play here. To seek Christ in others is also to let ourselves be sought and served as Christ by others. It is to allow our bestest, most preposterously good, forgiven selves be acknowledged by other preposterously good, forgiven souls. It is to stand under the totality of the moon where we erase differences, iron over our sharpnesses, and begin to be seen as good. The good news of the good news is that we

already stand under the totality of an eclipsing eye of forgiveness  
where we can only laugh, cry, or gasp in awe at how wonderful it all is.  
Amen.