

Jesus said, “Your sins are forgiven; rise and walk.
Forgiveness is I, becoming We, becoming Yours.
Forgiveness is a song to sing: O Lord, unlock the door of my heart. Amen.

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone
who sowed good seed in his field...
but...an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat.
When the plants came up and bore grain, the weeds appeared as well...
The slaves of the householder came and said to him,
Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?
He replied, No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat
along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest.”

Before I begin this morning,
I want to clarify that I will only be looking at the first half of the Gospel reading.
Pretty much everyone agrees that the second half, the explanation of the parable,
is not authentic, was not said by Jesus and was added at a later date.

As our tomato plants and green beans grow fuller and taller this summer,
Jesus’ words to his apostles about not pulling up the weeds
until the crop is ready to be harvested sound completely at odds
with even the most basic gardening practice.
Most of us work throughout the growing season to get rid of the weeds
so that the plants we choose to have in our gardens
have a decent chance of bearing vegetables and fruit.
We watch as bindweed cleverly wrap itself
around our precious cucumbers and peppers in chokeholds.
We battle it out with them, wondering why God created weeds,
along with viruses, mosquitoes, and telephone solicitors.
Jesus’ advice may leave gardeners and farmers shaking their heads.
But maybe the real point of this passage is not gardening advice!

The commentaries offer several different interpretations of this parable
but there was one that really spoke to me, especially now.
The key phrase in this passage is
“Let both of them grow, let both of them grow.” Let them.
That verb, *aphete*, is used throughout the Xn Scriptures
and has a number of meanings, but the 2 primary ones are to permit and to forgive.
To permit and to forgive. The first, to permit, is easy to understand.

The householder is, in essence, giving permission for the weeds to grow together with the wheat until the harvest. But the idea of forgiveness is harder to understand. Are we supposed to apply forgiveness not just to weeds but all kinds of pests and evil things that are part of this world? Are we supposed to just let them be? Aren't we supposed to fight them? To eradicate them? Isn't there a big difference between giving permission and forgiving someone? Not according to the original Greek verb. They go together. And think about the nature of God. We were created with free will. We can do any darn thing we want to – as helpful or as misguided as we choose. So God gave us permission, a free rein, to lead our own lives. And along with that permission goes the divine abundance of forgiveness.

You know the weeds in this story aren't just plain old weeds. The word means a weed called darnel, which is not only toxic but twists itself around other plants, making it extra hard for them to grow. I was thinking about this image of weeds and wheat and wondering why that dynamic felt so familiar when I realized that it reminded me of the current zeal for tearing down statues of people that have espoused values that many of us don't agree with. So the statues of everyone from Confederate generals to George Washington have either been torn down or are in jeopardy. Is there a parallel between the weeds and the statues? It doesn't make sense to have statues or memorials glorifying traitorous or racist actions. But, but, tearing down statues doesn't change the past or the facts. All of the hatred, divided loyalties, and messiness that characterized the Civil War and so many other events can't be changed or erased. As Elie Wiesel reminded us many times, the best way to prevent another Holocaust from is never to forget, always remember. So as the statues disappear I hope that we can replace them with other reminders, more appropriate reminders, of the folly of human nature, and our propensity to hurt each other. A lot of things have changed over the centuries but unfortunately, human nature, has not.

We are as in need of God's forgiveness now as the Roman emperors, Genghis Kahn, Adolf Hitler and all the other infamous evildoers throughout history were.

And that brings me back to this crucial, central idea of forgiveness. It is so easy to look back over history and point our fingers at, well, pretty much everyone who ever lived because none of them lived 100% pure lives. They all had inconsistencies, flaws, blind spots, because they were human. They all were sorely in need of God's forgiveness just as we, we, are sorely in need of God's forgiveness.

We seem to be operating out of a kind of arrogance these days, that we alone can see the truth.

We alone know what is right and what is wrong.

Well, I can assure you that 100 years from now, they will look back on this time and wonder at the short-sighted, even cruel things we consider normal and shake their heads at us. Nicholas Kristof wrote an editorial for the NY Times last Sunday in which he made this point,

using the example of current animal treatment practices.

Laboratories and other organizations have tortured animals for years without much protest from us humans.

Along with our wayward human nature is a thirst for justice.

We want to see the guilty punished and the blameless rewarded.

The system of reward and punishment runs deep in our souls.

The idea that Derek Chauvin, the officer who killed George Floyd, is as deserving of God's forgiveness as Mother Theresa sticks in our throats.

As Fr. Alonzo Pruitt so bravely preached a couple of weeks ago, God loves Derek Chauvin as much as God loves George Floyd, and to hear a black man say that was powerful indeed.

But here's the point.

We seem to be lost in a sea of pointing fingers at everyone around us when the critical challenge is for us to attend to our own lives, to live the best lives we can.

Il faut cultiver notre jardin. First, we must tend our own gardens, as Voltaire so wisely counseled.

We, you and I, are as in need of God's forgiveness as anyone else is.

We seem to have lost the humility to know ourselves to be in constant need of God's mercy.

We, I, do those things that we should not do,

and fail to do the things we should do, all the time, all the time.

And that it is only through the abundant grace and mercy of God,
that all of us, all of us, can stand before God with bowed heads and grateful hearts
for all of the forbearance and generosity of God.

How did Jesus choose to end his life?

On a cross, with his enemies gloating and probably high fiving underneath him.

“Jesus on the cross doesn’t threaten his enemies, he forgives them:

Aphes, he says one last time.

(*Aphes* from the same verb in this passage from Matthew)

And then there’s the clincher.

On the basis of Jesus’ ministry as risen,

there is no change in that policy.

He comes forth from the tomb and ascends into heaven

with nail prints in his hands and feet and a spear wound in his risen side –

with eternal, glorious scars to remind God, angels,

and us that he is not about to go back on his word from the cross.”

(*The Parables of the Kingdom*, R. Capon)

None of us deserves forgiveness,

not the holiest saint and not the most terrible criminal.

It is God’s most gracious gift. Thanks be to God.