

The forgiven forgiver
Matthew 18:23-35

Sin management is a priority for many of us. But many people don't like to take this issue seriously. Evangelists generally proclaim the Christian message like this: "You are sinners. Repent of your sins and be saved." The message itself is authentic. But it's too shallow for deep contemplation, even among Christians who profess that "Christ is my Savior."

I agree that sin is an issue that we cannot avoid when thinking about Christian salvation. But rather than the simple message of sin, repentance, and salvation, I would like to explore the roots of our struggle with sin in our lives today.

On April 4, 2002, Rev. Don Rooney, a Roman Catholic priest, killed himself. He had been accused by his parishioners of child sex abuse. We don't know why he chose to kill himself -- whether to prove his innocence or to relieve himself from the burdens of shame and guilt. He killed himself rather than face the accusation that he had sexually molested schoolgirls in the 1980s.

At his funeral, Cleveland Bishop Anthony Pilla reflected on Rooney's life and death. Pilla spoke tenderly on the topic of his suicide. On his reflection, an Ohio newspaper reported: "The depth of Pilla's tenderness surprised some, especially those who say they had tried to raise concerns about Rooney. At least four women say they were touched inappropriately by Rooney when they were schoolgirls in the 1980s. They say they thought Rooney deserved mercy but also wonder why church leaders never extended equal compassion to them."

Rooney's story reminds us that this is a sad story not only for his friends and relatives, but also for the victims, because their feelings remain unresolved by his suicide. Unless there was reconciliation between Rooney and the women, between the forgiven and the forgiving, there could not be a happy ending.

A woman who was abused by Rooney in the 1980s suffered from deep wounds created by his abuse of power. She felt deep shame about the abuse, while Rooney suffered from guilt. The woman could not repent of her wounds. Instead, she reported the abuse to the appropriate authorities. By reporting her abuse, she was able to confront and resist Rooney. If Rooney had not committed suicide, she could have personally forgiven him in due course. This is not a finished story of a man, but an unfinished story for the victims.

Today's scripture reading, Matthew 18: 23-35 tells about the parable of the unmerciful servant. There was a servant who owed ten thousand talents to the King. One day the King ordered that the servant, his wife, his children, and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." The King took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let the servant go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed and choked him, and demanded: "Pay back what you owe me!" His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back." But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could repay the debt.

When the other servants saw what happened, they were greatly distressed, and went and told their King everything that had happened. Then the King called the servant in. "You wicked

servant!" he said. "I canceled all of your debt because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?" In anger, the King turned his servant over to jailers to be tortured, until he could pay back all that he owed.

This story is about more than injustice or forgiveness. It is about life in the Kingdom of God among the people of God. In this story, Jesus uses the image of release from debt as a metaphor for forgiveness. There are two kinds of relationship in this story: the king-to-servant relationship and the servant-to-fellow-servant relationship.

A King is frequently the chief protagonist in rabbinical parables, and usually stands as a symbol for God. The value of ten thousands talents would be about ten million dollars today, and a hundred denarii would be twenty dollars. The New Testament uses the Greek word *aphiemi*, meaning "to forgive". This word also has a sense of remission of a financial debt. This implies that there are two kinds of forgiveness: human forgiveness and divine forgiveness. Through divine forgiveness, sin and its consequences can be removed.

Sin is a major concern of the New Testament. Divine forgiveness is possible because of the loving nature of God. One of Jesus' innovations in the Gospels is the idea that the Son of Man can forgive sins. The ministry of Jesus brought unprecedented forgiveness of sins. He pardons sins as a part of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

Forgiveness is not just the end of anger against an offender. It also renews fellowship between the two parties. The Bible consistently teaches that we must forgive one another, based on God's gracious forgiveness of us.

The parable of the unmerciful servant is a charge against those who draw on God's mercy but offer no mercy of their own. The parable even threatens of God's anger: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." So, when the Christian prays, "and forgive us our debts" he or she must also be able to say "as we also have forgiven our debtors."

Last Monday I went to the Cheyenne Public Library as a proud Cheyenne citizen. It is a well-built building with a wonderful atmosphere. I picked out a book called "The Power of Apology" by Beverly Engel. In her book, Engel shared her story:

When I was 35 years old, I divorced my mother. I felt that it was the only thing I could do. Not only had mother severely damaged me with her emotional abuse as I was growing up, but she continued to emotionally abuse me every time I saw or spoke to her. I became so emotionally and physically stressed when I was with her that my health was affected. And so I made the difficult yet necessary decision to stop seeing her.

This estrangement went on for 3 years. During this time I wrote a book entitled "Divorcing a Parent," in which I told my story about divorcing my mother and encouraged others in similar situations to consider doing the same. Then one day the phone rang, and when I picked it up the person on the other end of the line said, "I'm sorry." I recognized the voice. It was my mother.

Waves of relief washed over me. Resentment, pain, fear, and anger drained out of me.

Much to my surprise, those two simple words seemed to wipe away years of pain and anger. They were the words I had been waiting to hear most of my life.

Have you heard about the intergenerational cycle of violence? The following letter was sent to Psychology Today from an inmate awaiting sentencing for armed bank robbery. The inmate tells the story of his adoptive mother, Beulah, who was abused as a child herself. She later became a "nightmare of abuse," and made the inmate's childhood a living hell. Wrapped up in Beulah's abusive behavior was her warped religious faith.

Her belief in God was a sincere flame, and she taught me that God made all that is beautiful in the world. She also taught me that this same God would destroy me in the fires of hell for one single sin. I would never presume to know the number of eye-rattling, ear-ringing whacks that marked the hours in Beulah's presence, but I've been knocked unconscious by a stainless-steel pot, a birch log, and the metal end of a vacuum hose. . . Some vengeful demon fired a rage in her that distorted her thoughts and fueled the vicious cycle of violence.

Over the past twenty-five years, many researchers have written about the cycle of violence. One researcher, Kathy Wisdom examined the records of more than 1,500 criminals. She wanted to find out whether the experience of abuse or neglect during childhood leads to criminal activity as a juvenile or young adult. Her research revealed that a victim of child physical abuse or child neglect is prone to violence and criminal behavior in later years

This intergenerational cycle of violence is a spiritual disease that is incurable. Its origin is most often long term, unresolved anger about being victimized by parents. However, in God's Kingdom, it is possible to forgive and be forgiven.

Several years ago, I received a phone call from my parishioner, Yoon. She wanted to refer me to a friend from work, who she thought was being attacked by an evil spirit.

One day, Yoon's friend Kay had gone shopping at an oriental store. There were lots of imported items for sale: pottery, brass candle holders, picture frames, bamboo baskets and so on. After looking at the interesting items, Kay found a curious jar. On the jar there was a tag with a notice that read: "Do not break the paper seal. It is dangerous." But the Kay was so curious about the jar she opened the sealed paper to look inside the jar. Soon afterwards, strange things started to happen to her.

Kay purchased a necklace, a couple of picture frames, a mirror, and a pair of candle holders. When she returned to her home, she had a strange and fearful feeling. She opened and unpacked the bag from the oriental store, and took the new items out. She tried to hang the frame up, but the frame wouldn't stay straight on the wall. It would hang upside down, whatever she tried to do.

And Kay also noticed that she broke whatever she touched in her kitchen. Cups, bowls, and dishes – whatever she picked up -- slipped, dropped, and broke to pieces on the floor. In addition, when she looked at a mirror, her reflection looked strange, with a swollen forehead, swollen lips, and distorted eyes and nose. Kay couldn't sleep from that night on. She had nightmares. She felt that she was going crazy.

So my parishioner Yoon asked me to help her friend. She had already told Kay, "My pastor, Rev. Cho, has the power to cast out evil spirits."

I was finally contacted by Kay and made an appointment to meet her at my office. It was the Monday after Easter. I told her to bring to me whatever she was scared to touch. A blonde-haired lady came into my office with her boyfriend. Kay looked very pale and sickly.

I explained what I was going to do. I brought a baptismal bowl from the sanctuary. The bowl was filled with water which was used for baptism on the previous Sunday. I sprinkled water from the baptismal bowl on her and the items that she brought. And I said to her; "This is the water that cleansed human sin last Sunday. I bless you with this water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore you will be freed from suffering, fear, and the darkness of evil." After her visit with me, she was freed of her anxiety, fear, and guilt.

I put this baptismal bowl on the altar as a symbol of forgiveness and the cleansing of sin. To remind and renew our baptism, and to receive strength to forgive or to apologize to those who need it from us. As you leave the sanctuary after service this morning, I will stand back and offer a sprinkle of this water to remind and renew your baptism. If you would like to take this symbolic blessing, please come forward.