

A Community Formed by Forgiveness

Matthew 18: 15-22

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 7th September 2008

Over the recent sabbatical I discovered the works of the contemporary poet, Stephen Dunn. In one poem he reflects upon his daughter's experience attending a summer Vacation Bible Church. It's called "At the Smithville Methodist Church." Dunn and his wife are basically agnostic, skeptical about religion in general and not sure what to make of their daughter's emerging faith. In the end, they are humbled by it. Here's how he captures it in verse:

It was supposed to be Arts & Crafts for a week,
but when she came home
with the "Jesus Saves" button, we knew what art
was up, what ancient craft.

She liked her little friends. She liked the songs
they sang when they weren't
twisting and folding paper into dolls.
What could be so bad?

Jesus had been a good man, and putting faith
in good men was what
we had to do to stay this side of cynicism,
that other sadness.

OK, we said, One week. But when she came home
singing "Jesus loves me,
the Bible tells me so," it was time to talk.
Could we say Jesus

doesn't love you? Could I tell her the Bible

is a great book certain people use
to make you feel bad? We sent her back
without a word.

It had been so long since we believed, so long
since we needed Jesus
as our nemesis and friend, that we thought he was
sufficiently dead,

that our children would think of him like Lincoln
or Thomas Jefferson.
Soon it became clear to us: you can't teach disbelief
to a child,

only wonderful stories, and we hadn't a story
nearly as good.
On parents' night there were the Arts & Crafts
all spread out

like appetizers. Then we took our seats
in the church
and the children sang a song about the Ark,
and Hallelujah

and one in which they had to jump up and down
for Jesus.
I can't remember ever feeling so uncertain
about what's comic, what's serious.

Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes.
You can't say to your child
"Evolution loves you." The story stinks
of extinction and nothing

exciting happens for centuries. I didn't have
a wonderful story for my child
and she was beaming. All the way home in the car
she sang the songs,

occasionally standing up for Jesus.
There was nothing to do
but drive, ride it out, sing along
in silence.¹

What is this “wonderful story” Dunn is so envious of? How do you sum up the Christian story? I’m not exactly sure there’s one story we tell. The story is *Jesus* and *Jesus is* the story of God’s love. But how do we tell this story? It’s really more like a multi-faceted-gemstone-kind-of-story. There are many aspects to it and we approach it from many perspectives and angles.

It seems to me that everything we do in a church is grounded in the belief that we have a story for our children. Our worship, our fellowship, our community around this table are all because we have a wonderful story for our children. Our ministries of sympathy, service, and witness, our educational and missional aims are all because of this story. Even all the dust and debris, the torn up floors and demolished walls around here, the entirety of our \$1.5 million renovation project are all because of this wondrous story.

There are plenty of great stories to shape the lives of our children, but what makes this story different is the way it speaks to the “why” question. Evolution, for example, speaks to the “how” question. How we got here. But evolution doesn’t love you. The Christian story is less about how we came to be, then *why*. I believe in evolution, of course, but our job in the church is to speak to the question why. Parents can tell them how (in

¹ Stephen Dunn, *New and Selected Poems, 1974-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 183-184.

time), how they came to be, but the deeper more profound question of *why?* Why do they exist? Why do we exist? Our story that puts them – *and us* – into this deeply disturbing and scary, yet wildly wondrous and glorious world – puts them and us *into* this amazing world with meaning, purpose, love, and grace. The story tells them *why* they exist. It gives them and us a song to sing and sanctifies their lives and ours, and makes them holy. They can't discover this on their own; neither can we. It doesn't emerge from the depths of our psyche when we're alone awake at night and fearful. The story tells us that we are loved more than we could ever possibly imagine, that we're not alone, that Jesus is present within us and among us.

For Matthew here, one significant part of the gospel story is *forgiveness*. Forgiveness, which, of course, is related to God's love and grace. Forgiveness stands at the center of the gospel narrative, the church's story.

However, neither Jesus nor Matthew had any romantic illusions about the nature of the church. "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love," yet painful breaks can occur in our relationships. "We are one in the Spirit," yet cruel words and thoughtless actions can separate us from each other. "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord," but there's plenty to threaten the stability of even the strongest of churches.²

Matthew tells us how to live together. Work it out. Seek reconciliation. Try to make amends. Reach out. Why? Because wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name he's there too. When we're quick to accuse and judge and shun someone from community, remember that Christ is among us, and in the other we want to shun. By focusing on Jesus in the center of the community we remember it's not about us; the church doesn't exist for us we exist for the church; God doesn't exist for us, we

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 209.

exist for us. The focus on Christ draws us out of our isolation and allows us to live together.

But Peter, always the practical one says, “Okay, Lord, fine. Sounds great in theory. But just tell me the minimum number of times I have to forgive so I know when I don’t have to forgive any more and throw that person out of the church.” Peter wants to put a limit on the generosity of grace. But if we’re like him, then we really don’t understand what it feels like to be forgiven, to know grace. Seventy-seven times. Don’t count. Don’t keep track. Just keep on doing it. Why? There can be no community without forgiveness.

Now it’s possible to just tell or teach the story of forgiveness without being shaped by it. We can teach our children how they ought to forgive, but ignore it ourselves. However, this is not just a story we teach or tell (and when we do, we’ve missed the point). It’s a story we experience even as we tell it because already we’re *in it*, we’re within the narrative of God’s grace. We can tell the influence of the story by the difference it makes in our lives – how followers of Jesus relate to others, especially when the family of Jesus gathers and tries to be faithful together.

Knowing the undeserved and unearned forgiveness of God becomes the cornerstone of the Christian experience and sits at the center of who we are. It’s embodied in the Table. On the Sunday I was worshipping at Iona Abbey, a long Communion Table was set up right down the center of the nave. I wish we could do the same in our church, but our aisle is too narrow. It’s a powerful way to express that the Table sits at the center of what we do and we worship around it. That’s why Jesus gives it to us, and even why John Calvin (1509-1564) wanted Communion served every Sunday in Geneva, because it helps to remind us that Christ is among us and within.

He makes tangible the story of God’s forgiving love. And this meal is offered again and again and again in the hope that someday we’ll finally

get it – that we and our children will know we're *forgiven* in the eyes of God and then, in the words of Paul Tillich (1886-1965), "accept our acceptance."³ People long to know they're forgiven, whether they believe in God or not. Such is the depth of guilt so many carry around with them. We know there's nothing that can separate us from God (Romans 8). We can live from within this story.

To know we've been forgiven by God, but withhold forgiveness toward others is, in the end to be ungrateful. To know we're forgiven, yet withhold forgiveness toward ourselves is to be ungrateful. But with grateful hearts, accepting God's forgiveness at the Table, we can rejoice, we can jump up and down – even Presbyterians – singing hallelujahs, beaming all the way home.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland*

³ Paul Tillich, from his sermon, "You Are Accepted," *Shaking the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955).