

FORGIVENESS
Randall Tremba
August 2, 2015
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 51
(Nan Merrill, *Praying the Psalms*)

*Have mercy on me, O Gracious One,
according to your steadfast love;
According to your abundant kindness
forgive me where my thoughts and deeds have hurt others.
Lead me in the paths of justice, guide my steps on paths of peace!*

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On some calendars the first Sunday of August is known as "International Forgiveness Day." I didn't know that when I turned in my sermon title on Thursday. But I don't need a calendar to put forgiveness on my mind. Forgiveness has been on my mind ever since those incredible stories of forgiveness became public following the nine cold-blooded murders at Emanuel AME church in Charleston, SC on June 17.

And perhaps by now you've heard about the mother who spoke of forgiveness following what appears to be the cold-blooded murder of her son by a Cincinnati campus police officer on July 19.

"I've been a servant of the Lord for as long as I've been living on Earth." These are the words of the mother, Audrey Dubose. "I know the Lord, and I know the wrath of God. But I also know the love of God. I knew that God loved my child Sam. I knew that this was going to be uncovered. I can forgive the officer. I can forgive anybody. After all, God forgave us all."

Where does forgiveness like that come from?

Many of us can't imagine ourselves forgiving like that. Such forgiveness we say must be divine.

Well, it does seem supernatural but it's really as natural as can be if you understand that the divine and human are one, at one with each other. What we see in Jesus – divinity and humanity as one – is what we can see in ourselves. The bread of life is in our hands. The mercy we long for from God is the mercy already in our hearts. It's not far off in some distant place. It's in our breath.

*Have mercy on me, O Gracious One,
according to your steadfast love.*

This week marks the 70th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If you're Japanese how can you ever forgive that? If you're American how can you ever forgive Pearl Harbor or the Bataan Death March or POW camps?

Maybe we could say: all is fair in love and war and move on. But not everyone can move on.

Perhaps you've heard the story of Louis Zamperini as told in Laura Hillenbrand's book, *Unbroken*. Louis Zamperini, a WWII American POW survivor, was hell-bent on returning to Japan to kill the guard who tortured him. Somewhere along the path of revenge Louis suddenly found incredible mercy in his heart. Yes, he had been blinded by hatred but then he saw something amazing. He returned to Japan to find and forgive his tormentor, known as "The Bird."

Where does forgiveness like that come from?

This week I came across the story of another WWII survivor. I came across the story of Takashi Tanemori in his book: *Hiroshima: A Bridge to Forgiveness*.

Takashi was eight years old when the bomb struck Hiroshima 70 years ago on August 6th. The bomb blast blinded him in more ways than one – temporarily in one way; permanently in another, or nearly so as we're about to see.

All six members of his family were killed including his father who had taught him the seven codes of the Samurai. Takashi swore revenge on Americans.

Ten years later, at age 18 he managed to make his way to the USA. He scratched out a living, married and had three children. But he was still blinded by hatred.

And then something happened.

Thirty years ago on August 5th while driving across the San Francisco Bay Bridge to speak at an anti-American rally, Takashi had what he called an epiphany. Above the bridge he saw clouds forming into the shape of a mushroom. And just like that he was back in Hiroshima under another cloud.

He began sobbing and quickly crossed the bridge and stopped. And then through his sobbing he heard the voice of his long dead Samurai father, saying, *let it go, son. Let the hatred go. What good will revenge really bring?*

In that moment the words of his father's teaching came back to him: *Live each day of your life for the benefit of others; then all will benefit.*

There and then Takashi found what had been lost. He found a heart full of forgiveness, forgiveness for Americans, yes; but also a heart ready to ask forgiveness of those whom his nation had hurt. And then out of the blue a white butterfly flew into his car, sat for a moment on the dashboard and then glided out the other side and up into the now clear sky.

Since then for the past 30 years Takashi has devoted himself to the work of teaching conflict resolution and forgiveness with lessons like this:

Whatever people's given or chosen religious faith, or lack thereof, instead of resorting to violence, war, and endless cycles of revenge, humankind must learn to forgive, to reconcile, to make peace with all whom we call "enemies."

And this: Forgiveness defines the relationship between human beings and the divine. Without forgiveness, human hearts strangle and wither.

And this: This inner transformation is much more powerful than atomic weapons or other means of violence attempting to move the world toward justice and peace.

Can you believe that? Can you trust that with your life and your own war against others and yourself?

I don't know who or what has hurt you lately or in the deep, dark past. I don't know how many poisonous grudges you are nursing or how many death wishes you hold against others. But I do know this: to live on this planet is to be hurt and to hurt others many times over.

None of us are completely innocent ever. All of us do harm to others. And here's something else I know: the mercy and forgiveness we offer to others is the mercy and forgiveness we receive.

Have mercy on me, O Gracious One. According to your abundant kindness forgive me where my thoughts and deeds have hurt others. Lead me in the paths of justice, guide my steps on paths of peace!

And I'm pretty sure the first step toward peace is forgiveness – beginning with your own.

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HYMN
Amazing Grace