

We're going to begin the reading today one verse before what is printed in your worship folder so that the meaning of what we hear is clearer.

As a way to get into the reading from Luke, I want to tell you two stories. The first is by Carlo Carretto who wrote a biography about St. Francis. St. Francis was known for his amazing love for all creatures, human and nonhuman. In this biography, Carretto describes Francis' experience with a hungry old wolf who had been terrifying the people of the village of Gubbio and preying on their livestock. Carretto says, "Francis went out to meet the wolf armed only with love. The townspeople were sure the wolf would eat Francis. But Francis simply considered the needs of both the wolf and the community. He discerned that the wolf was too old to hunt wild animals and just needed to eat, while the people needed safety for themselves and their animals. Francis proposed that the wolf be given food each day, and the wolf agreed to leave their sheep and chickens alone. Carretto writes in Francis' voice:

No, brothers [and sisters], I was not afraid [to meet with the wolf].
 Not since I had experienced the fact that my God is the wolf's God too.

What is extraordinary in the incident of the wolf of Gubbio is **not** that the wolf grew tame, but that the **people** of Gubbio grew tame, and that they ran to meet the cold and hungry wolf not with pruning knives and hatchets but with bread and hot porridge.

This is the miracle of love: to discover that all creation is one, flung out into space by a God who is a Father, and that if you present yourself as [God] does, unarmed and peaceably, creation will recognize and meet you with a smile.

This is the principle of nonviolence, and I want to recommend it to you with all the enthusiasm I can command. . . .

If human beings go to war, it is because they fear someone.

Remove the fear, and you re-establish trust, and will have peace.

Nonviolence means destroying fear.

This is why I, Francis, tell you this once again: Learn to conquer fear, as I did that morning when I went out to meet the wolf with a smile.

By conquering myself, I conquered the wolf. By taming my evil instincts, I tamed those of the wolf. By making an effort to trust the wolf, I found that the wolf trusted me.

My courage had established peace.

You can deduce the rest by yourselves.

Just think what would happen if one day you became nonviolent, and took the huge sums of money you spend on defending yourselves against fear and used them to help the people of whom you are now afraid. . . .

You will know peace then.

Is that too much to hope?

Perhaps someone is listening to me!

To whoever it is, I, Francis say: Be brave!"²

Story number two is actually a prayer written by the poet Padraig o Tuama from Northern Ireland where there were generations of violence, thousands killed before finally it ended, and healing could begin. He wrote this prayer for reconciliation: (p. 45)

Our story from Luke's gospel today is about **forgiveness**. It's about trusting Jesus so that we can forgive, endlessly if necessary.

If we start with the disciples asking Jesus to "Increase our faith" it sounds like Jesus is saying just have a little faith and we can do incredible things. But the disciples request for more faith is in **response** to Jesus saying, "Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, 'I am changing my ways,' you must forgive that person."

Jesus is asking us to do something really difficult. Jesus is asking us to be better than we are capable of being. Sure, many of us, maybe even all of us can forgive someone for hurting us once, maybe twice, but 7 times? 7 times in one day?

And so of course, the disciples ask for more faith. More faith, as if it is something you can get in bulk at the store. Fill up your ziplocks or bring your gallon jugs and get enough faith to move mountains.

I think Jesus may have been mocking the disciples when he said, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." Why would anyone want a mulberry tree to grow in the sea? What good would a tree planted in the sea be? Could Jesus be telling the disciples, and us that the size of our faith doesn't matter at all? If we had even a tiny amount of faith, we'd probably screw it up and use it to do something as ridiculous as plant a tree in the ocean – where it would die – because trees can't grow in saltwater.

So, if we'd mess it up that badly with a mustard seed sized faith, how much trouble could we get into with MORE faith?!

No, we don't need more faith. It's not about more or less faith. Even the tiniest bit of faith is enough. Because faith isn't a noun. Faith is a verb. It's an action, an attitude, a place we stand – near Jesus – we stand near Jesus, leaning on him even.

In so many places in the gospels "Jesus praises the faith of those who seek him out. "Your faith has saved you," he tells a woman who anoints his feet, a Samaritan leper who returns to thank him, and a hemorrhaging woman who grabs his cloak. "Your faith has made you well," he tells a blind beggar. "Such faith I have not seen in all of Israel!" he tells a Roman centurion." But, what is it that Jesus admires in these people? It looks like the only thing they do is turn to him. Come near to him, follow him. *Trust* him. What Jesus admires is their willingness — even in difficult, painful, and maybe even risky situations — to lean on **his** goodness, healing, justice, and mercy."¹

And then Jesus tells the little story about the servants simply doing what is expected of them. We shouldn't get hung up on the language of servants and masters. That's not the point. The point Jesus was making is that this is **not** an extraordinary thing, this life of faith that is really just **staying near Jesus**, trusting Jesus. It's as simple as doing the work you've been given to do. Our work is love. Loving God. Loving our neighbor, even our neighbor that hurts us 7 times in one day. That's the work of everyone who follows Jesus, so we don't expect special notice. Jesus says just do it and let the work be its own reward.

But, in this case, the work Jesus is telling us to do, the love Jesus is asking us to express is forgiveness. It's in our job description as those who lean on Jesus – to forgive endlessly, whoever needs it. Simply because it is our job and then we are to expect no special notice for doing that hard work of forgiving.

We are to learn to conquer fear, as St. Francis did so that he could go out to meet the wolf with a smile.

He conquered himself and his fear and through that conquered the wolf. He tamed his own evil instincts and through that tamed the wolf. By making an effort to trust the wolf, he found that the wolf trusted him. His courage had established peace.

This forgiveness to which we're called does not mean forgetting. We must remember so mistakes are not repeated. This forgiveness does not mean there will not be consequences. Actions have consequences and actions that hurt others must be stopped and they must have consequences that put boundaries around the pain caused, stopping it, trying to bring healing and restore relationships between those who have been hurt and those who have caused the pain. This forgiveness does not mean that we allow the hurt to continue or that we stay in a situation or relationship that hurts us or others. Sometimes all we can do is walk away from a situation or a person who cannot change because God desires an abundant life for us all. Jesus is not telling us to be martyrs or to stay in a destructive relationship.

Forgiveness is central to our life as disciples and Jesus tells us that it is not optional. It is at the core of our faith. Just as we have been forgiven for everything through Jesus' death and resurrection, so too, we are to forgive. But, no one can tell us how or when we must do it. For those who have been seriously hurt by someone else's actions or inaction, no one can tell you that you must forgive now or tomorrow. We're invited to live a life of forgiveness leaning on Jesus who works in us and through us to make forgiveness possible.

This everyday work is so **vital** that our world depends on it. In a world where friendships are ended, and families are split because of who they voted for this commonplace work of forgiveness is the holy work we're called to in loving our neighbors.

If we who follow Jesus don't do this work, then who will? The people who think Jesus came to condemn and judge the world that doesn't believe like they do or worship like they do or love the

same kind of people they love are not going to do this hard work of forgiving. It's up to us, those of us who hear Jesus' call to love all people, no exceptions!

It's worth asking **why** we're called to this work of forgiveness. Why does it matter? I've heard people say we forgive so that we are no longer captive to the person who hurt us. Forgiveness breaks the chain that binds us to the ones who have caused us pain and ends their ability to hurt us. But I think it's deeper than that. Forgiveness begins with God forgiving **us**. We begin every worship service confessing the ways we have sinned; the things we have done and the things we have left undone. We do that **not** because God wants to shame us or make us feel bad. We confess our reality to **restore** our relationship with God so that we can then go on with worship, remembering that God's love is greater than anything we could ever do to **damage** that relationship. And that is the **key**. With God, everything is about **relationship**; our relationship with God, our relationship with the world that God created and named good; our relationship with all the people and beings that fill this good world.

Forgiveness is important because when we hurt someone, that relationship is damaged and if it isn't repaired, the damage goes deeper and deeper. It begins to infect other relationships. It begins to hurt our health and the health of our communities. It begins to hurt the health of the planet. **Restoring relationship is the purpose of forgiveness.**

Forgiveness is about removing the fear and re-establishing trust. It's about creating peace by conquering our fear. It is about listening to the story of the one who has hurt us and it's about telling our own story so that the one we have hurt can begin to forgive **us**. It's simply our work as those who follow Jesus and because we follow Jesus, we know that **that** relationship makes it all possible. We lean on Jesus to do this hard work in us and through us for the sake of the world.

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¹ Richard Rohr, 'The Cosmic Christ'

² Debi Thomas on Journey with Jesus blog