

Forgiveness *Matthew 18.21-35*

The key message of today's reading is forgiveness. And, as it says in other places in the New Testament, Jesus is clear that unless we forgive others, we will not be forgiven ourselves. But forgiveness is hard. When we are hurt, or when someone we love is hurt, it is very hard to look past our own anger to be able to forgive someone. But I know that forgiveness is an important practice in our lives, and so it is something I have tried to teach my children.

When my daughter was 6, there was a girl in her class at school who was mean to her. This girl called her names, bossed her around, and hit her a few times. And my daughter would go on and on about what a bully this kid was. But I am trying to teach her to forgive. Because I know that when we don't forgive, it keeps us imprisoned.

When we don't forgive others, we continue to see them as bad people. In our simplistic thinking, we divide the world into good and bad people. The good people are us and our friends and all the people like us. The bad people are those who hurt us or our friends, and those whose lives are so different from ours that we don't understand them. We don't know why it is that some people are bad - they just are. That's all we need to know. We don't like them, we don't go near them. We are different to them. We are separate from them.

At the heart of unforgiveness is a belief that some people are different from us. And that makes us feel separate from others, and distrustful of others. We believe that some people are bad at their core, and that they cannot be trusted. And it makes us feel fearful and alone.

When we don't forgive, we become prisoners of our own unforgiveness. After 27 years of imprisonment, Nelson Mandela said:

"As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison."

So how can we forgive? How can we let go of the pain that someone has caused us? How do I help my daughter not to become scarred or hardened by the treatment she had from the girl in her class?

In order to forgive, we need to go through a paradigm shift. A paradigm shift, is a shift in the way we see the world. It's a shift in our deepest beliefs about the way the world is and about what is happening in any given situation. Stephen Covey, the man who wrote the popular book "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" gave an example of a paradigm shift that he had one day: He tells the story of when he was getting on the subway train and two young boys cut

in front of him, with their father following a distance behind. Once they were on the train, the boys kept running up and down the aisle and were making lots of noise and disrupting the other passengers. Stephen Covey said he tried to exercise patience and not say anything, but the boys' father just sat there staring out the window and didn't seem to notice or care what his boys were up to. Eventually it got too much and Stephen said he couldn't help himself and finally spoke to the father. He said: "Don't you care that your boys are out of control and upsetting all of the other passengers. Don't you think you should get them under control?" The father looked up, and seemed to notice what was going on for the first time. "Sorry," he said. "You're right, I guess I should. We just left the hospital. Their mother died about an hour ago and I guess they don't know how to take it. I guess I don't know either."

In that moment, Stephen had a paradigm shift - his assumptions about what was going on in that situation completely changed. He went from wanting to tell the guy off, to wanting to help him in whatever way he could. And that's the kind of paradigm shift that forgiveness brings about. It means instead of assuming that someone who hurts us is a bad person who is very different from us good people, we should rather recognise the more likely truth - that we are all the same. They are probably just like me in many ways. And if they have hurt me it is because they are reacting in some way to some hurt in their own life, or to some circumstances that I don't know about.

It means realising that we are all born good. We never set out in life to be bad people. But we are also all the products of our environments. Some of us have more opportunities than others. Some people get badly damaged. All of us make mistakes and deserve a second chance. It's funny how when we stuff up or make a mistake we blame it on the situation. We say: I was stressed at the time, I was in a bad place, I wasn't thinking right, it caught me by surprise. But when others do something wrong, we blame it on the person - *they're* mean, *they're* rude, *they're* stupid, *they're* a bad person. Imagine how much nicer the world would be if we did the opposite; If when other people did something wrong, we assumed that it was the situation that made them act that way and that actually, they were basically a good person; that they were like us - they meant well, and they were just trying to get by in life and be happy, and sometimes they got it wrong.

Because that is what it takes to forgive. It is to see that underneath our behaviour are a complex set of reasons and causes for behaving as we do. And underneath that are people just like us, who want to be liked, to be loved, to get along in life and be happy. Because that is probably more likely to be the truth. But it's a truth we would prefer not to see, because it means that like us, other people are worthy of forgiveness.

And so it wasn't hard for me to teach my daughter to forgive the little girl in her class. The little girl was only six, and had signs of having been abused. She had been in the care of Child, Youth and Family and had probably suffered more so far in her short little life than most of us ever will. And so I was able to say to my daughter, that this other little girl had a hard life, and that she was probably very sad, and that she hurt other people because she felt sad.

If we do not forgive, we cannot be forgiven. If we do not forgive, we are not free.