

TEXT: Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35
THEME: God is merciful
SUBJECT: Forgiveness
TITLE: Learning to Forgive

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
13 September 2020
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

Robbie, falsely accused of a crime by Briony, Cecilia's little sister, is sent off to prison. As England enters WW II, Robbie is given a choice: remain in prison or join the army. Robbie is a graduate of Cambridge but because of his prison record he cannot go to officers training. He joins the army and serves as a private fighting in France.

He writes to Cecilia from France encouraging her to make amends with her family. Cecilia has broken off all contact with them, including her brother whom she loved, because of their treatment of Robbie. Cecilia reply's to Robbie's entreaty:

"They turned on you, all of them, even my father (who had paid for Robbie's education at Cambridge). When they wrecked your life they wrecked mine. They chose to believe the evidence of a silly, hysterical little girl. In fact, they encouraged her by giving her no room to turn back. She was a young thirteen, I know, but I never want to speak to her again.

"As for the rest of them, I can never forgive what they did. Now that I've broken away, I'm beginning to understand the snobbery that lay behind their stupidity. My mother never forgave you your first. (Robbie, the housekeeper's son, surpassed the son of the lord and lady of the manor academically at Cambridge.) No one wanted the police to ask the obvious questions. The police had you to prosecute. They didn't want their case messed up. I know I sound bitter, but my darling, I don't want to be."

Briony passes on her place at Cambridge, claiming she wants to do something practical for the war effort. She goes into nurses training in London. She writes to her sister, Cecilia, who is a ward nurse in London. Briony wants to meet to apologize for falsely accusing Robbie of something she knew he didn't do. "What I did was terrible. I don't expect you to forgive me."

"Don't worry about that," Cecilia said soothingly, and in the second or two during which she drew deeply on her cigarette, Briony flinched as her hope lifted unreally, "Don't worry," her sister resumed. "I won't ever forgive you."

As Briony helped wash bed frames in carbolic, swept and polished floors, ran errands to the dispensary, was sent to help dress a boil, and covered for Fiona who had to visit the dentist, she felt her familiar guilt pursue her with a novel vibrancy. All she wanted to do was work, then bathe and sleep until it was time to work again.

But it was all useless, she knew. Whatever menial or humble nursing she did, and however well or hard she did it, whatever illumination at Cambridge she had relinquished, or lifetime moment on a college lawn, she could never undo the damage. She was unforgivable. The only conceivable solution would be for the past never to have happened. (Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, c. 2001)

When the past
comes to live
in the woods
behind your house,
you must go to the window,
forgive yourself
once again,
and welcome
the creature
that suns itself
on the sill. (Nancy Compton Williams)

Adam Michnik, the founder and editor of Poland's newspaper of record, is a figure of epic proportions. A chain-smoking bear of a man, he credits Josphe Czapaki with providing an example for him and claims to have drawn great strength from him. "He was one of the greatest people in my life, one of the greatest."

Born to Jewish communist parents in 1946, Michnik began his career as a dissident at an early age. That he was to become a champion of the Polish Catholic Church's involvement in the Solidarity movement indicates his remarkable sphere of influence. As a history student at Warsaw University, he stood up in support of the Polish opposition, writing an open letter to the Communist party. This letter landed him in jail for two months.

He was arrested a second time during a phase of state sponsored anti-Semitic harassment and served a longer prison term. In prison a third time, awaiting trial, Michnick read a book of essays by Czapski. He carried the book into the courtroom, holding it by his side as judgment was passed. He was sentenced to three years in prison.

"Just as I was being sentenced," Michnik wrote, "I was thinking, what would Czapski do in my place, what would he be thinking? It was scandalous how I was tried—they wouldn't let me speak in my own defense during the proceedings. So just after they read my sentence, I stood up with Czapski's book in my hand and, looking into the eye of the prosecutor and the judge, I said, "After all I've heard and seen here today, I can do only one thing to remain faithful to myself and to my conscience: I forgive those who tortured me and those who slandered me."

Michnik had been thinking of the way Czapski had negotiated his response to Adolph Rudnicki. Af first, Czapski refused to see his old friend, but eventually he found forgiveness in his heart. "I always remember that," Michnik said. "It helps me when I'm faced with what feels like people's small-mindedness."

The quality of mercy . . .
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. (William Shakespeare)

Love cannot exist fully where we carry unresolved and unreconciled grievances. Whether we find ourselves holding grudges against others over small things or carrying burdens of apparently justifiable unforgiveness for enormous injuries, what we carry around unforgiven divides us not

only from others but—if the parable Jesus tells in the gospel reading for today is to be believed—from God, and so from ourselves as well.

Truth be told, the parable is not so much a threat as a description of how life works. Just as there are laws that govern the physical universe, so there are laws that govern the spiritual life. These laws are no more arbitrary or externally imposed on the soul than the laws of physics are imposed on matter. The inherent consequences of ignoring, denying or defying the laws of the spiritual life are as consequential as ignoring, denying or defying the law of gravity.

Forgiveness has two necessary ingredients. First, it means giving up a desire for harm to come to the person who has hurt us, either at the hands of God or at our own hands, in this world or the next. Second, forgiveness means actually and genuinely longing for the welfare of the person who has committed the injury. Wanting another's well-being is not necessarily wanting what he or she wants. It is wanting another to be able to live in the love God created us for.

The hardest part is wanting to forgive. Understanding the pain and brokenness of those who wound us weakens the desire for revenge. Seeing the consequences to others as well as to ourselves of our lack of forgiveness eases the way to freedom.

We forgive not because it is what good people must do, but because it is what we need for our own wholeness and the wholeness of the people with whom we live who are on the receiving end of the unforgiven hurts we suffer.

PRAYER: Ted Loder

O Physician of our souls,
 heal us of our self-inflicted wounds
 and the several dis-eases others
 have thoughtlessly bequeathed us,
 and we them,
and use us as your instruments
 in healing those we have wounded.

Mercy us into humility and gratitude,
 restore our souls to singing,
 our hearts to loving,
 our hands to doing justice.

Empower us to press on still and sturdily
 in the way you have shown us in Christ
 until we know in our blood and bones
 that nothing can separate us from your love.
 Amen.