

February 13, 2011

**The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**

Matthew 5:21-37

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Before attending seminary, I interned for a year at a church in North Carolina. During that internship I had the privilege of getting to know Mary. She was a member of the altar guild and the chair of the ECW (Episcopal Church Women). She was in church every Sunday – sitting towards the back on the left-hand side. She was the last to go into church and first one out the door after the service so that she could greet everyone. Mary is to this day one of the friendliest, most engaging women I have met. She puts everybody at ease and has a smile that can light up an entire city block.

At some point in my internship Mary shared with me some of her story. She had a son who was murdered when he was in his early twenties. The man who had killed him was caught, prosecuted and convicted. As you can imagine, Mary was enraged about the murder of her son. She was inconsolable. She had already lost her husband, and now her son had been taken from her prematurely. Her grief was unimaginable. She talked with her friends, she talked with her priest, nothing helped to ease her pain and take away her fury. Mary felt like nothing was helping her.

One day she came to the realization that she had to try something radical. To the surprise of her friends and family she did the unthinkable. She met the man who had killed her son and she forged a relationship with him. It was hard work and it came at great cost to her. Some members of her family felt betrayed, like she was dishonoring her son. But, Mary told me, building this new relationship challenged her heart in new ways. And it caused her to examine her faith. She pursued this relationship because she had decided that she did not want to live the rest of her life carrying around hatred for her son's killer. She already had enough pain and sorrow to bear; she was unwilling to bear the burden of hatred too.

Over time Mary not only set aside her anger and hatred, she eventually went so far as to advocate for this man, asking that his life be spared. She didn't want another mother to mourn. She couldn't stand to see another son die before his time. She didn't believe that any justice came out of taking a life for a life. Mary said that her faith taught her that God was compassionate and full of mercy. She did all in her power to emulate that faith. And so, after many difficult conversations and a lot of hard work she forgave this man for the pain he had caused and for the wrong that he had done to her son.

Jesus says, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." God calls us to acts of reconciliation. This is not easy to do. We have amazing stories of reconciliation like the work initiated by Nelson Mandela in South Africa and led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As you all

know they established a process whereby perpetrators were invited to come forward and tell the truth about what happened to their victims. They had to confess their role in the violence, and if they did this, they were granted amnesty. Victims, their families, their perpetrators, and the whole community came together in this process and instead of judgment and punishment, instead of furthering the violence against one another, truth was told. And from the truth-telling forgiveness was offered and new life was discovered for all involved. But these are the super-heroes of reconciliation. They are the stories of extreme pain, extreme sin, and incredible acts of forgiveness.

Many of you are probably thinking: this is outside the realm of my abilities; I feel the same way. I can't imagine coming to the point of offering forgiveness for anyone who would harm either of my children. But here's the rub: my friend Mary, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the people of South Africa who participated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, they are each an example of what the gospel calls us to do. Go, first be reconciled to your brother or sister. It seems like God is asking too much of us. Surely God doesn't mean that we should forgive murderers, adulterers, thieves, liars - those people over there. Yes. God says be reconciled. Whatever the wrong; the end result is that relationship has been broken. What once was good and life-giving, now causes pain, anger, unhealth even, and sorrow.

Generally we can recover, but it takes work, uncomfortable work, relational work. When someone has harmed us, it is hard to want to repair that relationship and offer forgiveness. When we ourselves have harmed someone, it is hard to swallow our pride, admit our wrongdoing, and reach out to ask for forgiveness. But God calls us to attend to our relationships with one another, even and probably most especially those broken relationships. When asked how many times we are to forgive someone, Jesus says we are to forgive 7 times 70. This is tough, tough work.

Luckily most of us will never be called into as dramatic an act of reconciliation as my friend Mary, but none of us are immune. All of us are all called into daily acts of forgiveness thru the small hurts. In our friendships, in our families, none of us are without fault in our relationships with one another - despite ourselves we do cause harm. And on the flipside we do at times experience the pain of having been wronged. Instead of harboring these wrongs, holding onto them and counting them as precious currency to use against one another, God expects more from us. God calls us to forgive and be reconciled, just as God forgives us our wrongdoings.

The good news is God has given us the gift of community, a community that sustains us through our suffering and pain, a community that helps us to move forward and discover new life within us. The amazing work of reconciliation that happened in South Africa was possible because the community recognized that the only way that they could heal was not by ignoring the existence of the other, but by forging new relationships out of the brokenness out of the ashes destruction and all move forward into new life together. The same was true with Mary, without the support of her faith community and her friends, she would not have had the courage or the strength to even try to build a relationship with the man who killed her son and let go of the hatred and anger that were holding her down. God knows that we are interdependent creatures, that we need

one another. We need community to help us move beyond our limitations, and grow into the fullness of love that God created each of us to be.

God is asking huge things of us. We must find the strength and courage to work toward reconciliation in our relationships with one another, but God also provides us with the skills to do it: love, the support of community, and forgiveness.

The anthem Jubilee that the choirs sang last week expresses beautifully our hopes for what will be the result of the work of reconciliation in our lives. They sang: "May we become the love we seek."