Forgiveness and Gratitude

Narrative Lectionary

October 7, 2018

Exodus 19: 3-7; 20: 1-17

It has been a tough few weeks for many in the US as well as many here, watching the events unfold in the confirmation hearings of Brett Kavanagh and the accusations of sexual assault against him. Two weeks ago, the scripture reading was Potipher’s wife, falsely accusing Joseph of sexual assault. It was timely and an important message to tackle but it was our Parish Ministry Sunday and café church and we wouldn’t be following the readings for the day. I considered moving that reading to another Sunday but the next one available was today, thanksgiving and I thought, that would not be a very good issue to raise on Thanksgiving Sunday. I prepared to do a sermon on gratitude and there, on Friday morning in my news feed, was an article by Diana Butler Bass called [#MeToo and the Spiritual Struggle for Gratitude](https://gratefulness.org/blog/metoo-and-the-spiritual-struggle-for-gratitude/). She identifies a church she will never visit because her uncle who sexually abused her is buried there. So I plan to draw largely from her article and share her insights and wisdom, which I found very helpful. As I do, I am very conscious that these past few weeks and months has been difficult for survivors of sexual abuse, harassment and assault, and am aware that this includes people in this room who also may be triggered as we explore this difficult topic. Know that I found this article and information helpful as Diana speaks about her healing journey toward gratitude, not for what happened to her but for the healing. Also know that if you need to talk, I am available or can help you find someone you are comfortable talking to.

Before we get into the article let’s look at todays reading in the context of gratitude. The people of Israel have traveled across the desert, including the Red Sea, to Mount Sinai, where Moses now is receiving the Ten Commandments from God. The story has God tell Moses at the very start: “say to the house of Jacob and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” The Israelites are reminded what God has done for them, bringing them out of slavery. They are reminded of their deliverance, for which they are to be thankful. The commandments given, are part of a consensual covenant, guidelines and laws to follow in order for them continue in good health and good community for generations to come. They have been a lost and ungoverned people. As slaves they were told what to do and when to do it. They had no choices. Now they are free and they need some guidance, which God offers in the commandments. This makes me think of residential school survivors who went back home having had so much taken away from them, who never knew anything but residential school life, and many never experienced love of family. What guidance did they have to put their lives back in order, when they returned home? How do survivors navigate the pain and loss? What is needed? What can help? Diana Butler Bass’ article is helpful here.

As a teenager, Diana turned to a fundamentalist church in search for freedom from pain. She found spiritual safety that she now realizes came with a price – the requirements of forgiveness and the cheerful piety of gratitude. She says that forgiveness and gratitude are intimately connected and her research for her recent book, [Grateful, the Transformative Power of Giving Thanks](https://dianabutlerbass.com/books/grateful-the-transformative-power-of-giving-thanks/), confirmed that. She writes in the article:

Forgiveness clears our lives of negative emotions, allowing space for positive emotions — like gratitude — to [enable healing](https://onbeing.org/blog/elizabeth-bruenig-we-are-not-beyond-repair/). That church however, got something dangerously wrong. They failed to realize that forgiveness was a process to work through anger, grief, and confusion. Instead, they attributed “bad” emotions to “Satan”: They pushed victimized people toward immediate forgiveness and thanksgiving, the “good” emotions they believed proved one’s salvation.

Forgiveness and gratitude are essential to healing, and they are, indeed, qualities of a mature spiritual life. Miraculous, even. But not all miracles are instantaneous. Coercing those who have been abused to forgive and give thanks reinforces the trauma, undermining genuine healing with misguided theology and perverse understandings of God and human nature.

Diana’s research also identified that so called negative emotions – fear, anger, greed, and regret – can block gratitude. At the same time, grateful people tend to be satisfied with what they have and are less likely to succumb to negative emotions. The message was we need to get rid of our negative emotions. This is where she felt stuck, Diana writes:

The fear was real, and it was not my fault. How to get rid of something you neither created nor deserved? What if you are afraid because your room was not safe at night? What if you are angry because no one protected you from harm? What if you mourn the loss of your sense of personhood? These are not just “negative” emotions. They are genuine feelings induced by trauma. They are natural responses when pain is inflicted on you — how much worse would it be if a victim did not feel fear, anger, and grief?

She notes that one study reports that while gratitude is positive for people to have, it is not always helpful in all circumstances, e.g. displaced gratitude under conditions of exploitation. She says: “Telling victims to “get over it” and to be grateful for being wronged only wounds the suffering and empowers perpetrators. Sometimes feeling thankful just has to wait. Gratitude can and should never be forced or faked. And it is never appropriate to cover-up or deny abuse or excuse injustice.”

Suffering exists in the world and it is one of the mysteries that we may never fully understand. Some have learned that suffering increases when we resist, deny, or fear negative emotions and those emotions often cause shame, Bass says. Shame blocks gratitude. If we can embrace our humanness, which I would say is also our divinity, with its’ mix of sadness and joy, we can foster vulnerability and authenticity, which increases our maturity to deep love. Diana writes:

Living into the mysteries of pain, injustice, illness, and violence is difficult. We humans rightly rage against these indignities, everything that works against joy, love, and peace. For decades, I wrestled with shame regarding my uncle. Those emotions were exacerbated by other incidents where I was rejected, hurt, or felt violated. The negative feelings — especially the struggle to trust, emotional defensiveness, and wrestling with profound self-doubt — were powerful. I often felt hopeless.

Then a friend who has known suffering said to me: Your life is like a garden, and it is not well tended. You need to grow your garden.

After exploring this analogy, she concludes:

Suffering is in the soil. From it grows both negative and positive emotions. The negative ones are like weeds in the high summer; the positive ones — including gratitude — too often the smallest of shoots. I have discovered that hard work on one’s knees is the surest way to tend the garden. Both in prayer and rooting around in the soul’s soil, recognizing the difference between what will inhibit the growth of goodness and that which is fruitful, and then plucking out the invasive species. If the work is done, the garden flourishes. And there: gratitude grows. It is a miracle of a sort. One that takes time. And patience.

I cannot remember a single moment when I forgave. It did not work like that. Instead, I went on. Nurturing what could be grown, rooting out the weeds. I left shame-based religion behind, opting instead to participate only in faith communities that understand grace and [practice forgiveness](https://onbeing.org/programs/evil-forgiveness-prayer-elie-wiesel-2/) as an organic process. I shared my experiences with trusted friends and family. I availed myself to the wisdom of spiritual directors and skilled mentors. Claiming my own faith, telling my story, accepting the care of elders — all opened space for growth and healing.

This process led her to compassion. Wondering what suffering her uncle went through that may have led him to do such a horrible thing. She saw him as a deeply flawed human being, not a monster. She concludes:

And I felt grateful. Not for his suffering. Not for the injustice done to me. No one should ever feel grateful for sin, evil, or violence. I do not know if what I felt was forgiveness, but I experienced a profound appreciation that my own pain had not taken the same form as had his. This suddenly seemed the long arc of miracle: the awareness that my life has been deeply rewarding. A good family, strong faith, meaningful work — my life had grown compassion. Through decades, I had cultivated the courage and conviction to make it to now — a life-giving present — and in midlife had done the work that enables me to say #metoo to a world of injustice and “thank you” for my own journey toward love.

Gratitude and forgiveness are deeply connected.

As we reflect on this, our journey, and our lives for which we have much to be grateful for, I invite us to reflect on the commandment to keep the Sabbath. In what ways do we take time for ourselves, for our families, to reflect on the areas that trouble us and appreciate the gifts we have? God gave us the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy for a reason. Self care, and honouring of the Divine in our lives is essential to maintain health and hope. This week in our book study, there was a spiritual practice we ended with called Daily Examen that I would like to share the first part of with you now as we close:

**1. Become aware of God’s presence.** Look back on the events of the day in the company of the Holy Spirit. The day may seem confusing to you—a blur, a jumble, a muddle. Ask God to bring clarity and understanding.

**2. Review the day with gratitude.** Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God. Walk through your day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights. Focus on the day’s gifts. Look at the work you did, the people you interacted with. What did you receive from these people? What did you give them? Pay attention to small things—the food you ate, the sights you saw, and other seemingly small pleasures. God is in the details.

The practice continues with paying attention to your emotions, choosing one feature of the day and praying from it, and then looking toward tomorrow. There are copies of the full practice at the back if you wish to take one home.

On this thanksgiving may you find the interconnection of forgiveness and gratitude that will heal you and fill your life with love and compassion. Thanks be to God.