

Being formed into community—telling our stories into our fuller humanity
Matthew 18:21-35
Meditation on forgiveness and jubilee

This is a meditation on forgiveness and jubilee.

The lectionary this week gives us a number of stories to choose from. All good stories that reveal our humanity and offer us insights into forgiveness and jubilee.

There's the story of Joseph and his brothers: he forgives them for selling him into slavery and they are reconciled.

Jubilee.

There's the story of Pharaoh releasing the Hebrew people: they step into the waters, crossing the sea on a dry path, released from Pharaoh, his armies, and slavery.

Jubilee.

And there's the story of Peter asking Jesus how many times he should forgive someone: 77 times, Jesus says.

Jubilee?

What do jubilee and forgiveness have to do with each other? My sense is that we think of them as different. Jubilee represents the Leviticus vision of reparations and restitution. It's a vision for a community, a people. Whereas forgiveness is about the individual and an interpersonal relationship. It's more about reconciliation. Perhaps we think of jubilee as structural, a systemic change. And forgiveness as something less tangible—something emotional or psychological in the individual. We can *see* and *touch* jubilee but not forgiveness. We know there's forgiveness only if or when we see broken relationships restored. We think about jubilee as Old Testament that was never realized and forgiveness as something that Jesus enacted and embodied in the New Testament. And while Jesus tells me to forgive, in the end, it's my choice. And if I choose not to forgive, the implications are contained to a broken or lost relationship. And my sin, which is significant, but it's *my* sin, my personal sin. In other words, the impact of forgiveness is limited to a few people, but the impact of jubilee is wide-spread, societal.

But if we consider *jubilee* and *forgiveness* from a biblical perspective, they are the same. The Greek word that is translated in the Old Testament as jubilee is the same word that throughout the Bible is translated as forgive. Let's listen again to our Scripture readings, substituting *jubilee* for *forgive* and vice versa:

Leviticus 5:13a Thus the priest shall make atonement on your behalf for whichever of these sins you have committed, and you shall be *jubilee-d*.

Leviticus 25:10 And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a *forgiveness* for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.

Matthew 18:21–22 Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, how often if a brother or sister sins against me should I *jubilee* them? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

I know, it doesn’t sound right. *Jubilee* is a noun, not a verb. But there are other ways to translate the Greek word. It means to let go, to acquit, to cancel a debt, to release. Mary Schertz, in her work with the Gospel of Luke, has suggested translating this verb as *release*. So let’s listen to a 3rd reading of these 3 verses:

Leviticus 5:13a Thus the priest shall make atonement on your behalf for whichever of these sins you have committed, and you shall be *released*.

Leviticus 25:10 And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a *release* for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.

Matthew 18:21–22 Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, how often if a brother or sister sins against me should I *release* them? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

It seems to me that, in 2020, *release* is an especially good way to translate this word. *Release* is, perhaps, more “real” than either *forgive* or *jubilee*. And by “real” I mean there is something physical, something see-able about release. As we approach fall, we will watch the trees and shrubs *releasing* their leaves. Trees are good teachers for us. Season after season, they show us what forgiveness and jubilee look like. Every fall, they release their leaves. And every spring, new life rises up into the branches, and buds form into leaves for another season.

What might our lives look like if we learned to release in the same way?

Some of us are reading and talking about Resmaa Menakem’s book, *My Grandmother’s Hands*. Menakem is a therapist and African American. And he’s written this book about trauma. About how our bodies hold onto trauma and pass it from one generation to the next. He’s writing the book to teach us how trauma works in our bodies, and how stored trauma is manifesting and sustaining white supremacy and racism.

Again and again Manakem writes that our bodies *hold* trauma—not our minds and our thoughts—but our bodies. And out of this unhealed trauma, black bodies are being hurt and violated and killed. Because our pain and trauma have not been *released* we unintentionally hurt others. And we ourselves are hurting.

When Jesus begins his ministry, he begins by announcing the year of the Lord's favor, the year of jubilee. He begins his ministry by announcing that *release* is here and now. And we watch his amazing and transforming ministry. When he encounters people, just as he said, they are *released!* We can *see* the release in real bodies. Over and over again, Jesus touches people and the trauma they've been holding in their bodies is released and they are healed. For some, the trauma manifests as sickness, for others blindness, or an inability to walk. When they are released, they experience the miracle of seeing or walking. But even more profoundly, when Jesus touches our deepest wounds, we experience healing. The Gospels make it look like it happens in an instant, and it's great when that happens. But very often the touch of Jesus releases us, one layer at a time. One season at a time. Like the rhythm of trees releasing their leaves.

Reading *My Grandmother's Hands* during this time of covid, and during this time when we are more and more awake to the reality of white supremacy and structural racism, offers new perspectives on forgiveness and jubilee...a fuller view of *release*. From the perspective of our current context, we can see that forgiveness is not personal—forgiveness is communal. It's collective. Of course forgiveness will always be about releasing sins. But more importantly and more urgently, forgiveness is about naming and *releasing* our pain, our wounds, our trauma. Forgiveness is about showing our wounded hands and sides to each other in the same way that Jesus showed his wounds to his dear friends. We show our wounds to each other, as sisters and brothers, so that long-held and deeply buried pain and trauma can be *released*. If we hold on to our wounds, the pain only gets buried, deeper and deeper. Causing more and more pain in ourselves and in those we love.

But Jesus shows us how to release pain and trauma—we release it by opening up, opening our hands and our hearts, being willing to acknowledge and sit with pain, and by sharing our woundings. There is no shame. There is nothing shameful about our woundings. They are part of our humanity. And they can be released. And we can be healed. It is not we who release, rather, we give ourselves, we open ourselves—we open our hands, we look at our wounds—and it is the power of Jesus that gives release. When we are willing to go into deep places of buried and scarred hurt and trauma, we ask Jesus to go with us. And the love and grace and release of Jesus touches us. And we too experience the miraculous healing of Jesus' hands.

When our wounds have been released and healed, the Spirit of God fills us with life-giving love and grace and release. Such love and grace and release that we, 70x7, are free to *release* others from the wounds they have unintentionally inflicted on us. Such love and grace and release that we can pray with Jesus, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.”

This...this is a fullness of humanity that Jesus shows us.

This...this is a forgiveness that we can see and touch in our bodies and beings.

This...this is jubilee.

May it be so.