

Forgiveness: Let it Go, or Let it Grow?
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Rev. Jennifer Gingras
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC

Matthew 18:15-35

I was way behind the curve when I finally watched “Frozen”, the Disney/Pixar movie about sisters Anna and Elsa and a lot of ice. It had been out nearly a year or more by the time I got around to watching it. As the storyline processed and the snow piled high, I just kept thinking, “This movie is about fear.”

If you watch very carefully, you might notice that the concept of fear is mentioned several times throughout the film. The older daughter, Elsa, is taught to “conceal, don’t feel.” She later sings, “There’s so much fear.” Another character alleges that he “was a victim of fear.” It’s a lot of a very heavy emotion for a movie with the theme song, “Let it Go.”

Perhaps that’s because the reality of “let it go” doesn’t actually change anything. Elsa can pitch her crown off the mountain, but she’s still the queen and needs to learn and deal with the way her experiences and abilities affect her relationships with other people. “Letting go” is really just more concealing and not feeling.

I worry that “let it go” is the message people of faith have equated with forgiveness. People are encouraged to let go of hurts, fears, and guilt. Let it go. In real life, like in the movie, that doesn’t seem to be enough. The realities of our experiences, what we have done and had done to us are still real, still powerful, and still affecting our relationships with others and, perhaps, with God.

“Let it go” may be a great song to sing in the shower, but it’s poor Christian practice.

Recently, we learned that ISIS had struck once again; this time executing 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians on a beach in Libya. I’m sure that I felt the same way many of you did upon hearing the news: heartbreak and rage mixed with a dash of helplessness. Our hearts break for the families who lost their loved ones, men who had left their homeland in search of work so they could put food on their family’s table, only to have their lives snuffed out by cowards in black pajamas. We’re enraged that such savagery

and bigotry continue to plague our planet, and the fact that we can't personally do anything to stop it fills us with a sense of utter helplessness.

Speaking for myself, when I hear about violence done by religious extremists I'm just angry. Really, really, angry.

And I struggle to understand how respond to the evil that is consuming the Middle East because every urge I have to see those barbaric executioners wiped off the face off the earth is met with a still, small voice.

It's a voice I confess I don't want to hear right now. I want the world to be rid of these monsters. But as hard as I try to ignore it, and no matter how much my heart fills with rage, that still small voice continues to haunt me with words like "Blessed are the peacemakers," "Love your enemies," "Turn the other cheek" and "Pray for those who persecute you."

Most days, I'll join the heavenly choir to shout those words from the mountaintop, but when I see pictures of 21 men awaiting their execution on a foreign beach, the last thing I want to do is turn the other cheek and love, let alone pray for my enemies.

It's my biggest struggle with the gospel.

On Sunday mornings, I enthusiastically celebrate the fact that grace and forgiveness has been extended to someone like me who doesn't really deserve it, but the idea of that same grace and forgiveness being extended to such villains is incomprehensible to me.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I find the gospel hard to swallow. When I see my faith in such a radical gospel put to the test, my zeal for the good news is reduced to a whisper.

Because it's easy to pray for people who get on your nerves or gossip about you behind your back. It's a lot harder to pray for people who brutally murder in the name of their God.

It's easy to talk about loving our enemies when their greatest crime is stealing our parking space or voting for the wrong candidate. It's a lot harder to love enemies who would gleefully broadcast your execution to the world if they only had the chance.

It's easy to embrace the radical grace of the gospel when you're sitting in a warm meetinghouse filled with compassionate people who feed the hungry and care for the sick.

Now, let me be clear. I struggle to pray for enemies like this. I can't imagine ever loving them. I recoil at the thought that Jesus willingly went to the cross, not just for the executed but also for their executioners.

Which is why as a gospel believing, grace loving Christian I keep asking myself whether or not I can continue to preach the good news of transforming grace being extended to people like me and then refuse to extend that grace to those who deserve it the least... but need it the most.

In other words, do I really believe in radical, transforming grace and forgiveness for all?

Or do I just believe in grace and forgiveness for me?

Now, if you're angry with me for talking about extending grace and forgiveness to those monsters in the black hoods, believe me, I get it. I recoil at even the possibility that God could forgive, redeem them, and make them my neighbors in heaven.

That sort of grace seems so unjust to me. And appalling.

So, I struggle. I struggle with my own sense of justice.

I struggle with the idea that as a Christian, I must leave space for forgiveness even as I rightfully demand accountability for my enemies' actions.

I struggle to accept the fact that believing in the radical transforming grace of God compels me to believe that grace abounded on that beach in Libya in ways I don't comprehend or want to accept.

I struggle with the boundless depths of God's love and forgiveness.

How can we forgive such heinous crimes against innocents? It messes with our minds. Yes, Jesus said forgive, but there must be a limit, and these crazy people crossed it. We want killers punished. But Jesus said, forgive not seven times, but 70 times seven. Let's count it up; we must be way beyond that limit now! When Jesus said "70 times seven" he was using it to mean "always." We must always forgive.

Jesus told a parable about the wicked slave who is forgiven a huge sum by his master, but then goes out and throws a fellow slave in prison for being owed just a fraction. We hear that the wicked slave then gets his just punishment. “Good,” we may say. He surely deserved that! We might forget that he was punished not because he owed money, but because he didn’t forgive. Jesus is very serious about this forgiveness thing.

Maybe Jesus in his humanity couldn’t imagine the kind of evil that infects our world today. Maybe if he knew how bad it could get, his “70 times seven” would have been tempered a bit. We see immense hurt and evil in our world and we want to see justice done. We cannot imagine why people maim and kill. We cannot understand the sickness of domestic abuse, trafficking of young men and women and children, the horror of genocide. These are evils that need to be dealt with. They need to be eradicated from the earth and humanity deserves to live in peace and safety.

Remember the heinous things that happened in Jesus’ time. They were actually not that much different from today – slavery, war, murder, genocide, abuse. It almost seems hopeless, as we have not learned a whole lot from Jesus’ time until now. But Jesus makes it very plain that we must forgive or we, too, will suffer.

So, how do we start? We might look at the Amish response to the tragic shooting of 2006, in which six children lost their lives. Their ability to forgive came from the center of their theology, which is the Lord’s Prayer. They actually believe it when they say, “as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Over and over, Amish leaders tried to explain that to journalists and others who could not believe the parents of the dead little girls could forgive. What we may tend to forget, which the Amish people also made quite clear, is that forgiveness did not take away the burning pain of loss. That old cliché “forgive and forget” just doesn’t work.

Forgiveness doesn’t numb our minds and hearts to the pain we feel. Forgiveness doesn’t mean justice should not need to be carried out. Forgiveness doesn’t mean that perpetrators should not be held accountable just because our hearts have gotten all warm and fuzzy.

Sadly, our world has not yet reached the fullness of the Kingdom. The wars going on in the Middle East, the genocides in Africa taking place in the name of God, the evils done to men, women and children – all need to be eradicated.

The victims will be forever changed, and that breaks the heart of God. We might begin our practice of forgiveness here: by offering the difficulty of our forgiveness to God. Pray that we might be able to hold the hurt of others in our hearts while we place those we need to forgive into the palm of God's hands.

Then we might look at forgiveness closer to home. This, perhaps, might be harder. When we are the ones who have been hurt, we may find that forgiving even close family members to be difficult. How many stories have we heard about brothers and sisters not speaking to each other for years, or churches being divided over small incidents? Hurt can go deep.

Being the first to seek reconciliation is hard, but that's what Jesus means when he says, "70 times seven." The good news in all of this is that we are not alone. In it all, God is with us. Forgiveness is only possible if we remember God is our strength. That promise upholds us even when our willingness to reconcile with another is rejected. God knows our heart, and has even promised that when words fail us, the Spirit will give us words.

Forgiveness is not just letting go, concealing our pain behind a false smile and ignoring the hurt. It is acknowledging wounds, debts, trespasses in our past that shape the map of our future. These truths of our experiences have power and voice. Forgiveness is also the desire to recognize the future is in God's hands, instead of entrenched in and gripped by our past.

And so my friends, maybe this is not the Sunday for us to sing "Let it Go."

Instead, let's lift up the realities of God's forgiveness - limitless and abounding, just and honed. God sets the standard, which is not about returning again and again to get burned and spurned. It is about not giving up, reshaping our covenants, our connections, and our community so that healing and wholeness are the inevitable results.

This is what Peter needed to learn from Jesus. This is what the unforgiving servant couldn't see.

Forgiveness is never "let it go." It's always "let it in", "let it work", and watch it grow. Amen.