

Forgiveness is a troublesome topic.

I have never been fond of it myself.

I want to ease into it today with a story about Abraham Lincoln -
something that happened after he became President.

Abraham Lincoln had an arch-enemy. Does anyone know who this was?

It was Edwin McMasters Stanton.

It all started back around 1857 when Mr. Lincoln had been named to the legal team
in a patent case in Cincinnati.

This was his chance to get into some serious law practice - make a name for himself.

Edwin M. Stanton was already a prominent litigator.

He, a man named George Hardin, and young Abe Lincoln were named to the case.

Stanton was able to deny young Mr. Lincoln any real role in the trial.

Lincoln was not only ignored. He was denigrated.

Stanton was quote as saying,

“Where did that long-armed creature come from
and what can he expect to do in this case?”

There were some different versions of the story, but suffice it to say, they got off to a bad start.

Young Lincoln felt that he had been tricked out of the case, and it deeply affected him.¹

At the beginning of the Civil War Stanton was a sharp and abusive critic of Lincoln.

Stanton referred to Lincoln as “the original gorilla.”

But Lincoln had been elected the sixteenth President of the United States,
and when it came time to select his cabinet - he selected Stanton to be Secretary of War.

Of course, there was uproar within the President's inner circle.

“Have you thought this through, Mr. President?”

“Yes, I know Mr. Stanton. I am aware of all the terrible things he has said about me.

But after looking over the nation, I find he is the best man for the job.”

So Stanton became Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War.

There's a little antidote I came over when studying Lincoln and Stanton.

It involves Rep. Henry Dawes from Massachusetts.

Rep. Dawes drops in on the President after the appointment was announced to congratulate him on getting such a man as Stanton for his Cabinet.

But in the next breath making some remark that led Lincoln to admit that

Stanton was known to get out of control from time to time -

to have an arbitrary temper - to be perhaps pig-headed.

Because they both knew this – Lincoln says to Mr. Dawes,

“We may have to treat him as they are sometimes obliged to treat a Methodist minister I know of out west. He gets wrought to so high a pitch that they are obliged to put bricks in his pockets to keep him down.

We may be obliged to serve Stanton in the same way, but I guess we'll let him jump a while first.

Besides, bricks in his pockets would be better than bricks in his hat.”

The historians tell us that as Stanton came to know Lincoln, he formed an opinion of his intellect so high that he said to one of his fellow-lawyers.

“No men were ever so deceived as we at Cincinnati.”

It was a friendship deep enough, and famous enough, to make everyone in Lincoln's room when he was about to die, wait for Stanton to speak.

If Lincoln had hated Stanton,

both men would have gone to their graves as bitter enemies.

Mr. Lincoln had the ability to forgive.

Lincoln transformed an enemy into a friend.

It is not always possible - but when it is – it is worth the work.

What would it have been like if Lincoln had been more interested in keeping score than in drawing out the best in Stanton?

Keep this picture – and I will give you one more.

This is shorter but every bit as powerful.

It is something that Albert Schweitzer said.

Albert Schweitzer once said this about forgiveness:

I must forgive the lies directed against myself,
because my own life has been so many times blotted by lies;
I must forgive the loveless-ness, the hatred, the slander, the fraud,
the arrogance which I encounter, since I myself
have so often lacked love, hated, slandered, defrauded, and been arrogant.



Let's go back to the 18th chapter of Matthew a few verses before our reading for today.

The disciples are asking who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus puts a child among them and says
whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest. We read this last Sunday.

Jesus is concerned about vulnerable people.

He calls us to share his concern.

He continues with the Parable of the lost sheep.

The shepherd is not content to have ninety-nine safe sheep.
He will risk everything to save one lost sheep. Every sheep is important.

Then Jesus talks about handling conflict in the synagogue.

The message is that it is our obligation to pursue reconciliation -
even at great cost of time and energy.

There is a common element in these things.

The common element is to throw away the calculator when dealing with relationships.

Today's reading extends this by calling us to throw away the calculator -
when it comes to forgiveness.

We have the story of the slave whose debt is so enormous -
only an act of majestic pardon could wipe it out.

Maybe the parting of those seas for the people to cross
onto new and dry land in our Old Testament reading is a good image.

It was not an issue of forgiveness for the Israelites -
that was an issue of oppression.

But try thinking of it as an image of passage into freedom.

Being able to forgive is no less a passage into freedom.



Let's make another shift and take it up a notch.

I have given you two images – one a story about Abraham Lincoln
and the other something Albert Schweitzer said about forgiveness in his own life.

What about you – what about me?

Surely there has been a time in your life that you needed forgiveness.
You wanted someone, or more than one person, to forgive you for something –
whatever it was or is.

And it happened. You were forgiven.

Or, someone, or more than one someone, did you wrong in some way
and it hurt you, it damaged you, it caused you harm.

And, you decided to let it go.

It would seldom be as simple as that.

But, you released it. Let's say you let the waters of a parted ocean
wash the hurt feelings away, the resentment away, the grudges away,
the secret plans to exact retribution.

Gone – left in the swirling waters of an ocean as it tumbled back together.

Why do you think that can happen? -

It can happen because it is in the nature of God.

That is what this scripture is about.

Page 5 of 6

This is a kingdom parable.

It is about the nature of God.

“...the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king
who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.”

Forgiveness is the nature of God.

When we receive forgiveness
we are then called – and we are able - to make it possible for others to experience it.



But Peter wants to know how many times he is to forgive, and Peter suggests 7.
Perhaps there is something about the number 7. It was to some people a holy number.
It represented perfection, fullness, abundance, and completion. Perhaps like infinity.

Whether it is 7, 70 times 7, or 77

Jesus is not inviting us to keep careful records.

It's not a math lesson – it is a grace lesson.



So, what is it? Forgiveness

There is no one definition. In general it is a decision to let go of resentments.

Forgiveness is when we untie ourselves

from thoughts and feelings that bind us to whatever happened.

It reduces the power those thoughts and feelings have over us.

Forgiveness is not being careless or indifferent to wrongdoing.

It does not mean there are no ethical standards – no tough love.

There is no requirement for passivity that would make us easy marks for unscrupulous people.

If there were no values or standards of conduct - there would be nothing violated –
and nothing to forgive. ²



Evidence is mounting that holding on to grudges and bitterness has long term effects.

Studies have shown that people who forgive have
Lower blood pressure, less stress, lower heart rate, lower risk of substance abuse,
less depression, fewer anxiety symptoms, less chronic pain,
more friendships, healthier relationships, improved psychological well-being,
and greater religious or spiritual well-being.³ Surprised?

No.

I guess that when the Lord forgave the slave – and the slave did not learn to do the same -
the slave suffered the consequences.

Remember it is a kingdom parable – it is the divine in our lives.

The kingdom is right here – not something far away –
or after death – or in another place.

One of the characteristics of Progressive Christianity –
is that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people
is the real expression of what we believe.

And if we believe the gospels – if we believe what Jesus believed –
it is our actions that will reflect that.

So, I invite us to consider where in our lives we want to infuse some forgiveness.

Where in your life might Mr. Lincoln be a guide,
and where might Dr. Schweitzer's words about himself give good counsel?
Where might the image of parting seas help you move on to a new place?
Is there a calculator you need to throw away? Amen.

¹ www.mrlincolnanfriends.org/content

² Craddock as cited by Dick Donovan

³ Katherine M. Piderman, Ph.D. Staff Chaplain, Mayo Clinic