

**“The Long and Winding Road to Reconciliation, Part 2
(or more aptly, Catherine’s take on it)”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for Sunday September 17, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Romans 14:7-13 (NRSV) and Matthew 18:21-35 (The Message)
(Sermon by the Rev. Catherine Somerville)

Last Sunday, Bill’s sermon was all about reconciliation, the process that involves at least two parties seeking a way forward towards understanding, and leading to mutual resolution. He reminded us that, so often, it only takes one person with strong conviction to make a difference and ultimately one person can change a situation. “Our goal as followers of Jesus Christ,” Bill said, “is to align ourselves with those who seek a difference that enhances God’s purposes and support’s God’s goodness in the world.”

Last week’s gospel lesson gave us the process. Jesus told us what to do when we find ourselves at odds with someone else. Go to them quietly, just the two of you, with no other audience and have a conversation. In today’s world, Jesus would likely say, “Call up the person who is angry at you, and invite them for coffee at Tim Horton’s. And make sure you pay for their coffee, for it is the least you can do for someone who has given you their time, and is giving you a glimpse of what courage looks like.”

If that ‘one on one’ coffee conversation doesn’t work, then take someone from the church to the next meeting; this person will act as listener and a guide, and he will help the two of you look for common ground. And if that doesn’t work, then treat the person, just like Jesus would. Treat them as a tax collector or a non-believer. In other words, bring the people you disagree with close to you, welcome them into your circle, pray for them, always seeking their well-being, rather than turning your back, or walking away, or saying something like, “I don’t care,” which in my mind, has got to be the most hurtful phrase in the whole world.

Today’s lesson continues in that way. How many times should we forgive? The disciple Peter tries to place a limit on forgiveness. Something manageable like seven times. Jesus ramps it up. “Not seven times, Peter; try seventy times seven. Try 490 times.” In other words, “Peter, your forgiveness must be beyond perfect. It must be beyond counting.”

Jesus spends such time speaking about forgiveness because he knows the effects that unforgiveness has, both on individuals and on our communities. There are so many situations that arise in our society, in the world, in our churches, in our workplaces, in our families, when conflict is not dealt with appropriately; it can sow the seeds of bitterness and fester into deep painful wounds.

We may resist forgiving because we think that the person who hurt us ought to do or say something to mend the hurt, or they must repay us for what we have experienced. We like to put conditions on our forgiveness: I’ll forgive you if you do X, Y, or Z. Sometimes we don’t know where to begin, and it’s shameful when we have to admit that we don’t know.

In the vocabulary of God, forgiveness means to release, to let go of the other. It is not denying the hurt. When we minimize what has happened to us, or gloss it over, or tell ourselves that it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive. Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the negative impact. To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment. It's a choice to leave behind our resentment. It is the power to keep us from being trapped and broken.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a woman in his congregation who came to see him. She was single, divorced, working to support her family of three small children. She said to the rabbi, "Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, or even share a treat, like ice cream, while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?"

The Rabbi answered, "I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't. It was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally, as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding onto him. You're not hurting him by holding onto that resentment, but you are hurting yourself."

Throughout the gospels, Jesus speaks about that sort of risky behaviour, about doing things we sometimes can't even begin to imagine, because love's power speaks to our hearts in new and holy ways, in the most surprising ways.

I invite you to hold Jesus' words close right now, feel them echoing around these walls, and take them with your heart as you need them. I want to tell you another story. I originally read this article in MacLean's magazine in 2009. This summer, on CBC radio, part of their programming was given over to repeats of some of the best stories they had covered. This story was one of them. I didn't catch the beginning, but it took me only a couple of minutes, to remember that I had read this story before. It is one of the most haunting stories about forgiveness I think I have ever heard. I kept the Maclean's article. Let me read it to you.

The bones of this story can be told in two deceptively simple sentences written by Margot Van Sluytman, a poet who lives in Calgary with her two daughters and the memories of a father stolen from her on an Easter Monday, 31 years ago. She wrote, "The man, Glen Flett, who murdered my dad, wrote to me. And I chose to respond."

The man, Glen Flett, who murdered Ted Van Sluytman at a Hudson's Bay store in Scarborough, Ontario, told his story in a Greek restaurant in Mission, British Columbia, where he now lives. He is 58 years old; more than one-third of his life was spent in Canadian prisons.

The evidence is written in deep creases cross-hatching his face. The truth though, is that Flett looks better than he has in years. He seems younger, healthier, and lighter

in spirit. He told the story of Margot Van Sluytman, and the unlikely kinship that they have developed over the past two years via a steady email correspondence and a few powerful face to face meetings.

“It’s strange,” says Flett. “Victims and offenders have a huge amount in common.”

What Flett and Van Sluytman share is the memory of Ted Van Sluytman, who worked in the menswear department at The Bay. He had moved his family to Canada in 1969. He thought they would be safe here. Margot was 16 on the day her dad died. There were three younger children and Ted’s wife in the family.

Flett’s memories of Ted Van Sluytman consist of a frantic ten or twenty seconds on the afternoon of April 27, 1978. Time enough for a tussle, as Van Sluytman, then forty, stepped into his path as Flett and an accomplice fled after robbing a Brink’s guard at the store’s cash deposit. Time enough for the accomplice to shoot Van Sluytman in the back, as Flett shot him point blank in the left shoulder. Time enough to hear him cry out and fall unconscious to the floor.

“I was 27, but I probably looked 20,” Flett says. “I’ll never forget when he grabbed hold of me, and said, “Give it up, son. It’s not worth it.”

It was actually Sherry Flett who sent “the email,” as Margot calls it, the one that set her and Glen on a path of reconciliation. It was a bit of an accident, probably, but Sherry is a strong woman with a way of cutting through the “garbage” to get things done.

She was an adult education teacher who married Glen when he was still in prison 22 years ago. He had turned his life around, and embraced Christianity. He was paroled in 1992, and he founded an organization that helps inmates re-integrate into the community in Mission, BC. He worked long and hard, so hard that he came close to burning out. One night the police pulled him over for speeding. He was drunk and there was a handgun in the car.

The judge who sentenced him the second time called him a ticking time bomb. In his sentencing, the judge told Flett to let go of the mistakes of the past, adding, “You are riddled, addled and saddled with guilt, some of which you should be, some of which you are carrying when you shouldn’t.” The ghosts of the past, Sherry knew, have to be confronted.

Sherry learned from a friend that Margot Van Sluytman was a poet and a publisher and a writing coach who emphasized the power of words to bring healing and therapy. Years before, when he was in prison, Glen Flett had contacted Margot’s family, but he discovered the family wanted nothing to do with him. Sherry sent an anonymous donation to the organization Margot worked for. Somehow Margot found out about the donor. She wrote back and asked if Sherry was related to the man who had killed her father.

“You’ve put your foot in it now,” Glen Flett told his wife. “You have to answer that.”

Sherry wrote back: *"I am married to Glen Flett. I am sorry if I have offended or hurt you in any way."*

And that's how the correspondence began, tentatively at first, with Sherry acting as the intermediary. Finally, Glen wrote directly:

Dear Mrs. Van Sluytman;

I read your words and truthfully I am without words. For so long I have prayed for this moment. Every day I pray that somehow you and your family have been able to move on from the despicable thing I did. Every day I say I am sorry but it never seems enough. I don't expect you to ever forgive me but I so hope that your wounds are healing . . . I would like you to know that I have put my whole heart into being a different man than I was.

Margot Van Sluytman believes in words, but she didn't know what to make of these words. Ever since her father died, she has used words to try and come to terms with the terrible pain that has filled her life. Before there were words, she overdosed on pills, struggled at school, and divorced. Until she began to write, she could not let go of the pain of her dad's death.

Finally, she decided that she had lived too long with grief. She needed this connection. She wanted her life back. So Margot Van Sluytman-victim, decided to meet Glen Flett-murderer.

They met on July 14, 2007 at the Benedictine monastery above Mission, BC. Sherry picked Margot up at the airport and delivered her to Glen.

Margot remembers it this way. She said, "You must be Glen Flett." And he said, "Yes." And I said, "I am Margot Van Sluytman. And we looked at each other and we started to cry. And we hugged. And we cried for awhile and he said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." And I said, "I know. I believe you."

There have been a few meetings since. It took almost 30 years to meet one of her father's killers, to get her questions answered, and see they were both locked in a sentence running since April 27, 1978. She accepted his apology at the abbey because she needed the release as much as he did. And today, they would both safely say that they are living a miracle.

Remember: Jesus said that one's forgiveness must be beyond counting. It must be beyond perfect. Following him is all about doing things we can't imagine ourselves doing, because love's power speaks in the most surprising ways.

Sources used:

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4, pages 68-73
Maclean's magazine, May 11, 2009.