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Freedom from Anger

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

A doctoral candidate asked me a fun and tantalizing question this week as part of an interview I agreed to participate in for her program. The question was: If I could change one thing about the world and/or my community, that I believed would make the world or community a better place, what would I change?

Oh, the possible answers to such a question! You might think of a few answers yourself, because who isn't eager to talk about what's wrong with the world today in a way that imagines how we could see it better if only something was different. When I joked, probably to buy time, about being limited to just one thing, my interviewer graciously allowed me far more than one. But I felt I would a better subject if I stuck to her rules, and just then, an answer came. If I had the power, I answered her, I would remove the anger that seems to be so deeply prevalent in America and our local communities today.

I went on to say by "anger" I didn't mean the natural kind of anger we humans feel when we have been wronged or experience injustice. Such anger, I believe can be called "righteous anger" and can be helpful, upon reflection, in identifying something that is wrong and needs to be corrected and can actually be the first steps in working toward a better world. I also didn't mean the kind of anger that is part of the natural process of grief. Very often anger is a surface emotion for loss or fear, and when we ask ourselves why we are feeling anger, or what is making us angry, it can help us identify where we are and what work of healing we need to do. These types of anger are temporary times in our lives, they are just part of our emotional wellness continuum; anger is not meant to be an emotion that stays in our hearts forever.

The anger I would vanish from our country isn't that kind of healthy expression. The anger I would expel is the anger I hear about way too often: the anger that has lingered in the hearts of people for so long it has created a culture of hostility, of arrogant self-righteousness, that bullies and excludes, that leads all too often to expressions of violence and hate. Especially since November of last year I've heard a lot of voices justifying this anger, telling me the people of America have a right to feel this brooding anger and it seems to me even more voices have tried to explain the source of this anger in numerous books and articles. Some say its job loss, others say its just their culture, others say its fear of the other, there are lots of explanations.

This particular strain of anger, whatever its source, is, I believe, causing a paralyzing problem: it is making people stuck in their anger so that no one can see anything but a past that may or may not be as it is remembered and a present that is detrimentally devoid of hope, with no better future in sight, which only leads to more anger. The anger itself is prohibiting those who are angry from moving forward, from grieving in a healthy way, from breaking harmful and unjust cycles of oppression and violence, and being part of the community.

While there may not be an easy or simply solution to this problem of anger, we did hear how Jesus addressed anger in the parable we heard in the reading from Matthew's Gospel this morning.

Perhaps you are thinking, this parable, indeed this entire section of Matthew's Gospel is actually about forgiveness, not anger. And if you are thinking that, you certainly have a point. Most scholars, commentators and translators have said exactly the same thing. In addition, numerous books and chapters in books and articles and even scientific studies have been written about forgiveness, and its benefit to our wellbeing. Forgiveness, some recent scientific studies have shown, can make us healthier physically; as their studies are showing those who forgive experience less diagnoses of heart problems, high blood pressure, cancer, and even physical pain. Psychological studies agree, those who forgive experience less anxiety, less depression, and, yes, believe it or not, a lot less anger than those who do not forgive.

Other writers point out it is our Christian duty to forgive, and often cite the very parable we just heard as a reason to do so.

But I am not sure Jesus' parable is as much a prescription for better living as it is a story inviting us to see a deeper reality, a deeper truth about God and God's love for all people. We can start by looking at the fictional characters in this parable. Please, let's all remember, parables are fictional stories that can help us see a deeper truth, they are not events that really happened.

The character who gets the most attention is the servant called wicked, toward the end of the parable because he did not give a fellow servant the forgiveness he had been given. Instead, when the wicked servant encountered the fellow who owed him money he acted violently, in anger. You might say the character embodied anger, as he didn't show any compassion or empathy toward his fellow human being even though they both struggled with the same problem of debt. We might wonder at this wicked servant, and why he didn't grant the forgiveness he himself had received earlier in the parable. When faced with a debt too large to ever be paid back, the wicked servant asked for mercy and received something more: complete forgiveness. Which in this case also meant freedom, freedom from living in debt. Any of us who live with any kind of debt, whether it is in the form of car payments, mortgage

payments, or student loans might have a hard time imagining what it would be like if our lenders completely forgave us our debt. We'd be free, liberated from monthly payments. We could do far more with our money, because we would no longer have to pay for something in our past, we could focus more on our present and on moving forward.

Much the like the Israelites in the reading from Exodus this morning, who went through the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea as a sign of leaving oppression behind and moving into freedom. The waters behind them meant there was no going back to being owned by an empire, they were free people, free to follow where God led them without fear. Such freedom must have felt exhilarating, full of possibility.

That same opportunity to live into freedom was given to the wicked servant when the king forgave his tremendously high debt. He was free from having to worry about money, but that is not what he lived into. Moments later it was like nothing had happened as he violently and angrily shook down a man who owed him much less than he had owed the king. Perhaps his anger at being owed, at his own generosity for lending money in the first place, or whatever the reason for his anger, prohibited him from fully realizing what it meant that he had been forgiven.

I believe we make a mistake in interpreting this parable by making it about our need to forgive. I am not sure this parable is about us as much as this parable is about God and what God has done and continues to do: God forgives us. Whether we deserve it or not. God forgives. Somewhere in time, God decided God would take the cost of human sin upon God's self by forgiving because when forgiveness happens, relationships can be healed, renewed, or restored, and when needed, released in a way where no ill will is desired. Only then is it possible to live a new way, one different from the cycle of angry violence and revenge.

Whether we choose to see the king in Jesus' parable as an allegory for God or an example of what it might look like to live into the forgiveness we've already received, the heart of this parable is that God forgives us our sins, our debts, which means we have been given freedom. Freedom to remember the past as it really is, not what we wish it was, freedom to be accountable without vilifying or demonizing those who hurt us, freedom to see someone who hurt us as human beings who were not able to handle their own hurt or pain well. Freedom to stop the detrimental cycle of anger and hate and violence; freedom to choose a new way forward, one that looks for solutions, for healthier community, for justice. And most importantly, freedom to forgive. For how else can we invite others to share in the freedom we have been given other than to forgive them? How else can anyone experience the tremendously generous love of God?

It's a radical economy of love, this forgiveness. And, according to Jesus' parable, it is the economy of God and God's Kingdom, not just in heaven, but here on earth.

Perhaps what made the servant "wicked" in Jesus' parable was his unwillingness to accept the forgiveness that had been given to him, to live into the freedom he had been given. He chose to stay in the economy of oppression and injustice rather than live into God's radical economy of love, and as a result lost his freedom altogether. Not because God is a God who goes back on God's word, but because there are consequences to choices, and when a person chooses to live into anger, that anger can create its own kind of prison around a person's heart, and mind and soul, which can be its own torture. And what is torture but a continuation of pain?

God's love tells us it doesn't have to be this way. And while there is no magic wand, like the doctoral candidate playfully offered in her interview question, to eradicate anger or injustice or fear or violence or racism or sexism or however you would have answered the question, there is in today's Gospel the reminder of our forgiveness. We are so loved, we have been forgiven and therefore we are free. The question then, perhaps, is how will we live into our freedom?