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How to Save the Planet

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Should you not have mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?

Matthew 18:33

According to the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Rev. Michael Curry, there is only one thing, in his words, that can “save the planet”. It’s not money. It’s not power. The one and only way to save the planet, Bishop Curry writes in his newest book, is love.

That answer shouldn’t surprise anyone who has ever read, listened to, or watched any of his sermons, habits of grace videos, books, op-eds, or pod casts. Bishop Curry is not afraid to talk about the power of God’s love. In his newest book, *Love is the Way* Bishop Curry shares the behind the scenes stories of how he learned God is love and discovered how to share this love with the world. He is clear to define the love he is talking about is not the stuff of romance, friendship, or family relationships, although they have their place. He is talking about the love of God in Christ, the love that looks outward not inward, love that shows care beyond self that invests in the wellbeing of others and in so doing actually changes the world, or at least someone’s world and is, in his experience, the way to save the planet.

One of the people who changed Bishop Curry’s world is a woman named Josie Robins. Ms. Robins volunteered to help his father care for a young Bishop Curry and his sister when their mother was severely ill and later died. He writes that Ms. Robins was able to make the “hurt go away.” Not by distracting him and his sister, but by being with them, helping do what needed doing like ironing clothing and preparing meals and making sure they were able to enjoy activities they had enjoyed with their mother. She kept showing up, for family celebrations, important events like graduations and ordinations, births, and deaths. She changed the world for Bishop Curry and his sister by loving them and being there for them during a time of uncertainty and loss and continues to be there for them today.

But there is more to Josie Robins than Bishop Curry knew when she first started helping take care of him and his sister. In the early 1960’s Ms. Robins worked as a principal in what was called St. Augustine’s School, and was later named

Fulton Academic Complex. St. Augustine's was a school for teenage girls who were pregnant that were kicked out of public schools because of their pregnancy. At St. Augustine's they were given the chance to complete their education, which meant the possibility of improving their life and providing a better life for their children. St. Augustine's also gave the young women the opportunity to be treated with dignity and respect, especially when they walked across the stage to receive their diplomas.

Today the school is closed. Which might sound like a bad thing, but Bishop Curry writes it is actually a good thing because Josie Robins and others advocated for these teenage girls to be given the chance to receive an education at public schools with the rest of their community instead of being punished and ostracized. Eventually, they were heard, and pregnant girls are no longer punished in this way. For so many girls, Ms. Robins changed their world.

To me, this story is a beautiful example of what love looks like, love in the form of forgiveness. Today's Gospel is all about love and forgiveness, and there are lots of sermons preached about Peter's question of how many times a person should forgive, and Jesus' answer in the form of a parable implies love can't be quantified, not even when it is in the form of forgiveness. In other words, it's not about the numbers, it's about living into what you yourself have received from God.

Jesus' parable about the servant who chose not to forgive has a lot to it. And of course, every time I preach or teach on forgiveness, I feel it is important to say what forgiveness is and is not, because there is a lot of misunderstanding about it. Forgiveness is not the same thing as forgetting. Forgiveness does not allow abuses or bad or harmful behavior to continue. Forgiveness remembers, learns, and changes. Forgiveness does not negate consequences, accountability or responsibility. Forgiveness is turning away from punishment, from wanting revenge; forgiveness is not wanting the person who caused you pain to experience your pain or hurt. Forgiveness is liberating yourself from destructive cycles of violence and power. Forgiveness does not always mean reconciliation, but it does mean healing. There are scientific studies that show forgiveness can have many positive effects on a person's emotional, mental, and even physical well-being.

These things are necessary to keep in mind because there is something more important that I want to mention about forgiveness today. Something that is

evident in Bishop Curry's story about Josie Robins, one of the people who changed the world and helped make Bishop Curry the person he is today. Forgiveness is one of the ways God love us.

That is what is at the heart of Jesus' parable about the kingdom of heaven that is like a king who forgave a debt so huge no one could have repaid it. That is what the kingdom of heaven is: extravagant love that practices forgiveness. That might why in the parable the king was so upset that his servant who had experienced the liberating love of God would not share that same love with another who owed far less than he. Since this is a parable, intended to give us much to think about, we might wonder did the servant who was forgiven so much actually believe he was forgiven? It can be incredibly difficult for people to believe God is love, that God loves them, and wants them to love others. Especially if they have not received that kind of love in their lives.

I meet people all the time who when they find out I am a priest start to lecture me about how God hates certain kinds of people, usually whoever is different from them, and how God is punishing people with natural disasters or disease. And while these encounters are opportunities to discuss how God is love, what it usually comes down to is I hear how very few people have had a Josie Robins in their lives, how very few people have had someone love them or care about them over their own comfort. It's hard to learn that all my Biblical references won't convince a heart hardened by a life that has experienced punishment instead of forgiveness and thus assumes that is what God is.

It reminds me the only way to save the planet, as Bishop Curry put it, to destroy the cycles of systemic racism, sexism, greed, environmental degradation, and violence that are at the root of the injustices and evils in the world, is to receive the love of God and then share that love with others so that others can see God is love. A powerful way this happens is through the religious practice of forgiveness.

I call forgiveness a religious practice because it is deeply rooted in our faith. In the Baptismal Covenant and in the Apostles' Creed we say we believe in the forgiveness of sins, and in the prayer Jesus himself gave us we pray for God to forgive us our sin or trespasses as we forgive those who trespass or sin against us. At the core of our belief system is the understanding that God is love and God forgives. Even when humanity was at its worst, when Jesus was crucified, he prayed God to forgive those who were killing him; that was Jesus' way of practicing

forgiveness. Love is what God is and what God is about and how God shows love is not by punishing, but by forgiving. In Jesus' parable in today's Gospel he shows us God isn't really that concerned with keeping score as much as God wants to love us and through us let that love change the world to be more what God dreams the world can be; a world that looks more like God's kingdom of heaven of liberation, mercy, and respect than a nightmare of fear, violence, and oppression.

That is why Bishop Curry's story about Josie Robins and her advocacy work that put her out of a job as a principal but opened the way for many more people who would have been punished by society to receive forgiveness and the opportunity to receive an education and make a better life is an incarnation, an embodiment of God's love, God's kingdom here on earth. Josie Robins changed the world for the better by showing the love of God in Christ.

Perhaps there is an opportunity for us today to reflect not only on who we can or should forgive, but on how forgiveness can become one of our regular religious practices both as individuals and as an institution. I heard a wonderful story this week about this from a woman who encountered someone in the grocery store who refused to wear a face mask and was loudly proclaiming anger at those who were wearing masks. The woman told me instead of being angry, instead of shouting back at the person who wouldn't wear a mask, she said a little prayer. She prayed for that person, that she hoped neither that person nor their family would get sick. It seems small, but that is forgiveness in practice. She didn't wish that person harm or suffering as payback for the anxiety they were causing her, instead she prayed for their health and wellbeing.

Perhaps if we all practice giving the forgiveness we have been given by God, even in situations that aren't about us personally, more people would experience God's love instead of a harmful substitute. Perhaps if we practice forgiveness more people will see for themselves God is love, loves us all extravagantly, and then share God's love so that together with God, we might just change the world and save the planet.