

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jun 12th 2016

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

On this date four years ago, my family was held hostage.

As we mark this anniversary, the ongoing act of forgiveness found through faith continues to set us free.

Jesus does not mince words in today's Gospel reading when he says, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Forgiveness found through faith sets us free.

Getting down to the nitty gritty, one might ask Jesus, "What does my faith save me from?" Or you might ask me, "What does forgiveness free us from?"

To begin today's reflection, I want to ask, "What is it that enslaves us?"

In a word: sin.

To be clear, many members of our human family today are victims of the heart-wrenching realities of forced labor, sex trafficking and domestic servitude. Let us continue to pray and work for their freedom.

Most of us will never experience the torture of actual slavery. That said, we know all too well that familiar feeling of the heavy bonds and burden laid upon us, sometimes daily, by the sin of another and of our own selves. We make decisions, large and small, to turn away from God. We experience lust over love, condemnation over compassion, addiction over attentiveness and fear over forgiveness. We know this as individuals and as a society.

On June 12th, 2012 my now-retired pharmacist father showed up for work at 8:00a.m. as he had done for the past 40 years in our family-owned and operated drug and gift store named Thiele's which stood facing the cobblestone streets of rural Alliance, Nebraska (population: 9,000). Within minutes of opening the store alongside two employees, a 27 year-old man, known to my father by his grandparents who did business at Thiele's, walked into the store, pulled out a gun and demanded money and narcotics. Then, what began as a robbery, quickly escalated into a hostage situation which would last the entire day. For some eight hours, at the hands of a man fueled on by addiction and deep inner turmoil, as my father was being held hostage in his office, the rest of my family and our community was held hostage too. All we could do was wait and pray: my mother just blocks away in their living room, my brother and sister 400 miles in opposite directions traveling quickly to Alliance, my wife at our home in San Francisco and I in Vietnam leading an immersion trip for high school students.

The filmmaker George Lucas is quoted as having said, “We are all living in cages with the door wide open.”

The readings today all emphasize that forgiveness leads us out of the cages that hold us captive. Cages of persistent pride, relentless resentment, boulder-sized shoulder chips, white-hot anger, cutting jealousy, and growing greed...at certain times in our lives we are thrown into these cages by the actions of another. In my experience, it is more often the case that I fashion and form the bars of my personal prison by my own choosing. Rather than acknowledging myself as a sinner who is loved by God, I berate and belittle myself as simply a sinner...period.

In the first week of the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius of Loyola invites us to meditate on God’s boundless, unbridled, relentless love for us and the various ways we choose to turn away from or separate ourselves from that love.

In today’s Gospel reading, a woman is standing before Jesus who has just washed his feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, kissed them and anointed them with oil. At the same time, a pharisaic host is overheard talking under his breath about this woman’s sin in such a way that must of been condemning based on Jesus’ response in the form of a story about forgiveness and love. While this woman’s silent actions show her desire to draw close to Jesus’ love and freedom, the host’s cutting comment shows his inability to look beyond sin and judgement.

The invitation to us is to take steps through the open cage door we construct around ourselves by choosing to embrace and embody God’s love. In so doing, we taste freedom. We join the psalmist in proclaiming, “with glad cries of freedom you will ring me round.”

My father’s steps toward freedom on June 12th came around 4:30pm. In a split-second opening, instincts took over and he ran. He ran the length of the store he began working in forty years prior with his father. Two screaming bullets managed to catch up to him, but he didn’t stop running. In seconds that must have felt like decades, he was able to outrun his oppression toward the freedom awaiting him on the cobblestone steps outside.

While there is much more to the story, for today’s reflection I want to emphasize the steps that continued to be taken beyond that day: the steps my father took to forgive this man and name faith as a key ingredient to his freedom...the steps my mother took to embrace the perpetrator’s mother who would show up on her doorstep days after the incident...the steps my sister has taken to teach her growing children about forgiveness and my brother has taken by literally tattooing the word “forgive” on his arm in the location where one bullet struck our father...the steps my wife has taken to pursue a job which supports victims of violent crime...

Forgiveness found through faith sets us free.

As we move deeper into this Year of Mercy as a church family, let us continue to support one another in taking steps toward freedom - freedom from sin and separation and freedom for God’s love and forgiveness.

