

Letting Go (Matt. 6.9-13)
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church
March 22, 2009

I wouldn't believe this story if I hadn't been there to see it. It is not a story that I have told before, but it is a story that comes to mind any time I read the rabbi's words,

"Forgive us the wrong we have done, as we have forgiven those who have wronged us."

There is much of the story that I do not remember. For example, I don't remember when I first met the man. I don't remember what his name was. I don't remember the cause of the illness that had brought him to the Intensive Care Unit. I retain only the vague impression of his lanky frame beneath a blue hospital gown. His room never had any visitors, the only sounds that filled it the mechanical rasp of an artificial respirator or the occasional alarm bell of an intravenous drip that had run out and needed replacement. The man was never conscious any of the times I visited him, at least not outwardly, and so what I learned about him I learned from the doctors and social workers who had asked that we meet for a bioethics consult. The problem we had was that the man had been deemed terminally ill by his team of doctors. He had little to no brain activity and multi-system organ failure; only machines kept him alive and the doctors recommended we discontinue his life support. The man had had quite a long stay with us, and I remember the doctors remarking that they couldn't figure out how he had kept alive, even with the machines, for so long. I remember these remarks because one of my friends, a nurse, had a different thought. "He's waiting for someone," she said. She said it as a caregiver who had spent years and years with people in similarly bad conditions. She said she'd seen it before, said his real trouble was off the chart. "He's waiting for someone," she repeated. I was very skeptical.

Chaplains in the hospital often do a little bit of everything, and I found myself recruited to join the social workers, who had been trying to track down the man's family for days. He didn't have living parents or a spouse, didn't have siblings or cousins or any real extended family. There was only one person, a daughter who lived out of state. It had taken some doing to find her, and the doctors wanted her to sign a release, allowing them to take the man off the machines. Physicians had spoken with the daughter by phone, but she was reluctant to make the trip. She asked to speak to the chaplain. So the social workers found me, gave me a few details and a telephone number, and left me in a room to dial up the daughter of a man who was supposed to be dead and wasn't. I don't remember much of that phone call either. But I do remember the daughter telling me that she didn't think it was appropriate that she come, that she and her father had been estranged for a very long time. I remember her asking if someone else could sign the papers. I don't know if this is still true, but at that time there was a way we could witness documents by phone so long as we had the requisite number of witnesses on different receivers, a faxed copy of the signature, and one or other things. I advised her of this process before stopping to mention, because I was the chaplain not the records clerk, that this would almost certainly be the last chance she would have to see her father. If there was anything that she needed to do, now was the time. I remember her crying over the phone and saying that she would come to Houston that week.

I never did ask the woman what it was that had created the rift between her and her father. Nor did I ask the man, who couldn't have answered me. I just continued to go into his room, once or twice a day, while we waited for the daughter to arrive. I would speak to him in a soft voice, tell him what day it was, inform him of who his new nurse

would be, and offer him some details about the weather or something. Then I would touch base with the nurses about all of the other patients. But my friend always seemed to find me and repeat, “He’s waiting for someone.” Knowing that his daughter was on the way, I started to wonder.

I know of no more challenging teaching of rabbi Jesus than his continued admonition that we learn to practice forgiveness. For in forgiveness we find a simple concept that reveals layer after layer of complexity. The simple concept, in my mind, is that of letting go. I associate forgiveness with letting go. Letting go of an anger that we have held for too long. Letting go of a hurt that we have nurtured over time. Letting go of the judgments we have formed about others. Letting go of some of the absolutes in our thinking. And here you can just let your own mind wander around with this simple question that turns so complex. What is it that you might have held on to that it would help you to let go? What is it that you need to forgive, whether you want to or not, whether you find yourself willing or not? What has hurt you or continues to hurt you that you need simply to release? And if you mull that for a moment, you may well ponder some of its layers. For the thing you are thinking about, the thing you hold within your heart and mind, is also connected to the outside world and the hearts and minds of others. I don’t think it’s any stretch to say that all of us are holding on to things. Everyone here has something that they need to let go, something they need to forgive. But everyone here also has something they need others not to hold against them any longer, something they need to have forgiven. I had a professor once who began his class by saying, “The first rule of ethics is that nobody’s hands are clean.” But I think that’s the first rule of forgiveness. And I suspect that we can only practice forgiveness with others if we are

first willing to forgive ourselves, lightening our judgments of one as we lighten our judgments of the other. “Forgive us the wrong we have done,” the rabbi said, “as we have forgiven those who have wronged us.”

Now there is much more to say about forgiveness, but I meant to tell a story more than I meant to get on a soapbox. Besides, I haven’t worked out all of the answers to forgiveness myself. More often than not, I seem to have a handle on what exactly it isn’t. For forgiveness is not forgetting. It is not the achievement of a just result or an evening of the scales. It is not wiping the slate clean. It is not easy. Nor is it quick. Real forgiveness, for ourselves and others, takes time. Sometimes weeks or months or even years. And its siblings, reconciliation and peace, they take time as well. None of these things appear for us overnight and none of them arrive without work. But the hope that the rabbi taught was that in our attempt to practice forgiveness with ourselves and each other, one day and step at a time, we would find a measure of healing. The healing of unclenching our tightened fists and letting go whatever it is that we have held too tightly. Only I know what that has been for me. Only you know what that has been for you. Only the man and his daughter knew what it had been for them. And then the day came to let it go.

I wouldn’t believe this story if I hadn’t been there to see it. But the woman arrived at the hospital and met me at the chaplain’s office. We took the elevator to the second floor and then walked down the corridor toward the Intensive Care Unit. We stopped just outside the doors there so that I could describe to the woman what she might expect to see in the room. I asked if she would like to visit her father privately or if she would prefer that I accompany her. She chose the latter option, so I led her through the unit

toward the open glass door with the drawn curtain, behind which her father lay. As we approached his bedside, the woman began to weep softly. She didn't make much noise, just shook as the tears flowed quietly down her cheeks. And in no time at all, she was leaning over the bed of her father, whispering to him. It was the most intimate of moments and I tried to step back and allow her some space. Even so, I heard among the murmurs the affectionate name "Daddy" and a repeated mantra that it was okay, that all was forgiven. I remember that word most of all, "Forgiven." I don't know if she said it once or if she said it a dozen times. My memory might be playing tricks with the day. But the number of times she said it is unimportant. Because what happened next really caught my attention. After the woman whispered to her father that all was forgiven, his heart monitor slowed, then flatlined, and he died with her there in the room. She did not consult a physician. She did not sign a release. She whispered into his ear. And he let go.

My nursing friend liked to tease me after that about how she had been right and I had such little faith. "I told you," she'd say, "his real trouble was off the chart." Only I wasn't ever very good at taking the joke. Because the whole story seemed like a mirror to me, showing me the most difficult questions on my own spiritual path. They are questions that I continue to put to myself and offer simply to us all. What are we holding on to? And what do we really need to let go? This Lent let us find the courage to whisper our answers.

May it be so.