

Cry, or Breathe, whatever it takes – Niqui Reinhard

Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:8-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

"I looked at the rich, dark brown of the piled earth, and there, hovering over it, was a gorgeous red-and-gold butterfly. Its wings moved delicately and it flew over the coffin and quivered in beauty as it hovered there. Grandfather saw it, too, because he stood still, looking, before he reached down and took a handful of earth and threw it onto the coffin, which had been lowered into the grave. 'Earth to earth,' he said, 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust.' The butterfly still hovered. And the words which followed seemed to me to have more to do with the butterfly than with what he had just said. 'The Lord bless him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him and be gracious unto him, the Lord lift up his countenance upon him, and give him peace.'

This excerpt comes from *A Ring of Endless Light* by Madeleine L'Engle, which was one of my first theology books I can remember reading a few times over. My little junior high mind started contemplating then, and I continue exploring with Madeleine now, this idea of the frailty and therefore sacredness of life. A brilliant etymologist, she conveys the beauty of the atonement, at-one-ment as remedy for disaster, or "separation from the stars, the sea, each other."

Madeleine L'Engle's vision for pervasive, universal reconciliation, while beautifully inclusive, is also incredibly challenging. She speaks of this reconciliation while referencing the *echthroi*, which is the Greek word for enemy; included among their ranks are the fallen angels, disease, famine and hatred. All those horrific things, which seek to cultivate the separation. Unforgiveness is another way of maintaining the separation of which she speaks.

So what happens with this separation, this disaster? We don't have to search far to see the consequences, one of which is siblings being able to abandon a brother in a well. I have to admit, it was rather difficult for me, at the outset, to empathize much with Joseph. I don't have quite as many siblings first of all, and the two wonderful siblings with whom I've been blessed, don't have symbolically meaningful dreams about my future, nor a desire to leave me to die in a well. At least as far as I'm aware. So to be candid, I was initially a little confused by Joseph when I reached the verse informing me that he wept. The pathetic, desperate, groveling of his brothers makes me want to roll my eyes, not cry.

However, after exploring some commentary on this passage, I discovered that Joseph was most likely not in fact moved to tears by their hokey speech. He cried because he had forgiven them a long time ago, but they still just didn't get it.

So upon further reflection, maybe Joseph's reaction was entirely appropriate. At least, I trust him that he is engaging in this encounter with his brothers on a deeper heart level, in the holistic

Hebrew heart sense, of which Dr. Hartley reminded us last week. At the end of this Genesis passage my NRSV translation tells me, “In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.” But I think the Spanish translation here evokes a much richer imagery. A literal translation from Spanish to English would read, “In this way he consoled them, and spoke to their hearts.” At least Joseph’s forgiveness wasn’t flippant and apathetic. We’re also warned against this apathy in our Gospel reading. It may not seem difficult to act less hypocritically than the unforgiving servant, however the admonition is not only if you do not forgive, but if “you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Our society today seems to have mastered the art of flippant forgiveness. With forgiveness floating around in my mind, I listened last week and the language of forgiveness continually resurfaced throughout the course of our worship. As a congregation we affirm the words of the Apostle’s Creed, and the forgiveness of sins falls in with the six weighty assertions of belief at the end. In our liturgy of the Eucharist we proclaim true grievance and humble repentance for our wrongdoings, but how often am I truly in a humble state of repentance when I come to the table?

I’ve also been doing some theology lately with Anne Lamott, the most recent addition to my assembly of insightful mentors. Referencing a friend of hers, she remarks, “He teaches his students, and has taught me, to slow down, breathe, and take care of everyone, which is of course the same message Jesus taught—that breath is our connection to holy spirit, to our bodies, minds, and soul; and that if the devil can’t get you to sin, he’ll keep you busy.” Forgetting to breathe seems one of the most accurate ways to describe what happens when I let distraction and disaster and separation reign in my life.

As I journeyed through Lamott’s thoughts on faith in her Plan B, I learned both from her keen insights as well as her irreverent honesty. She notes that, “Jesus kept harping on forgiveness and loving one’s enemies, so I decided to try. Why couldn’t Jesus command us to obsess about everything, to try to control and manipulate people, to try not to breathe at all, or to pay attention, stomp away to brood when people annoy us, and then eat a big bag of Hershey’s Kisses?” At least she’s honest. And I can’t help but wonder if her rants may be closer than I sometimes come to forgiveness. She takes the first step, of admitting weakness, and sometimes I remain in denial about the fact that forgiveness even needs to take place. I would rather make a flimsy effort to suppress my feelings of bitterness or anger than need to confront someone about them.

I also want to challenge those of you who are anything like me to be in the practice of forgiving yourself. Last year my friends and I completely dropped the ball in our volunteer work at Sunshine Ministries. Unfortunately this was right after being lauded for our faithful volunteering and we didn’t even realize we had missed it until about a month later. Now I feel a rock in the pit of my stomach every time I drive near their area of St. Louis or think about them. Part of me wants to go kneel at their feet and beg for forgiveness, but I also haven’t yet forgiven myself for missing that. But the thing is, I will fail people. Over and over and over again. And there is

nothing my perfectionistic tendencies can do about it. Except to humbly and sincerely ask for forgiveness.

Our Psalm reminds us that, "The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed." Yes. Like Simeon I will be able to say mine eyes have seen the Lord when more of that justice for those in oppression comes about in our world. But until then I have to keep reading, for "The Lord is [also] merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." I must not be angrily impatient for that justice, and as my God does, I must insist on love. As Madeleine L'Engle helps me remember, "We all want justice, but if we demand it at the price of love it will be dark justice indeed.

It is beneficial then also to return to our passage in Romans and relearn to leave the burden of judgment in the Lord's hands. "Who are [we] to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand." The following insight from a pastor holds particular poignancy considering the current economic state of this country. "What a tragedy that we forfeit the gift of freedom because we are unable to allow the spirit of love to form us into a people who practice the abundant economy of forgiveness rather than the bankrupt market of vengeance, getting even, and settling the score."

For those who have ever found themselves forgiving the same person and offense over and over, it becomes apparent that forgiveness is a posture more than an heroic act you somehow muster up the courage to accomplish every once in a great while. And in the interest of a community who seeks the healing of the broken and the wounded, it must be remembered that in situations of abuse, forgiveness takes an entirely different shape. Forgiveness is not forgetting and going back, quite possibly it means getting out, giving the offender's heart over to God, and moving on.

In light of entering the story with Joseph and his brothers, I would challenge us to cry more. Maybe for some of us it isn't literal tears, but we can all tell, if we examine ourselves closely, when we are in tune with, and when we are detached from life. When we are attentive to our inner-workings and interactions with others, and when we are going through the motions. So cry, or at least breathe, or whatever it takes for your repenting and forgiving to be sincere.

The next time I'm called upon to forgive or repent, I want to at least metaphorically cry. I want to do more than just give lip service to the solemn and consequential responsibility we Christians carry of loosing chains. So whether we're learning to forgive ourselves, or learning a posture of sincere forgiveness, or learning how to slow down and breathe, let's be loving and gracious with one another.