

September 17, 2023
Lectionary 24 Year A
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 50:15-21
Matthew 18:21-35
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The Forgiving Business

Last weekend my son, John, was in Matilda the Musical at Norwood High School. Matilda is a story written by author, Roald Dahl. Dahl wrote a total of 49 books during his career. 21 of those books were novels for children. And I have never read one of them. My children, on the other hand, have read and enjoyed many of Dahl's books.

Matilda is one of his most well-known books and it has been made into a movie and, obviously, a musical, but in spite of its popularity I was not familiar with the story before I saw Norwood High's production of the musical.

I must say that, after seeing the musical, I was shocked by the story's popularity. The kids who put on the show and the adults who directed and guided them did an excellent job. It was a great production, but the show itself, the story was very disturbing, very creepy.

In the story, the title character, Matilda, is an unwanted child. Her parents do not want her, do not appreciate her, and do their best to break her spirit, with unkindness and put downs. Then they put her into a school run by a woman who hates children and who believes that it is her mission in life to break children and make into little automatons who are not capable of creative thought or joy or any kind of kindness.

Because of Matilda's shocking level intelligence and her indomitable spirit, the story does have a happy ending, with the terrible headmistress of the school and Matilda's parents getting their just desserts for their terrible actions. The story has a happy ending, but there was a whole lot of horrible, meanness, and tragedy

that the characters and the audience had to get through in order to get to the happy ending.

It was so much meanness, unkindness, and even abuse, that at the end of the show, I had a terribly un-pastor-like, even unchristian moment.

At the end of the show and the story, Matilda learns that her verbally and emotionally abusive parents are being chased by the Russian mafia and she protects her father from being taken away from the mafia to be “taught a lesson”. I was okay with that. I was just as happy that the child, Matilda, didn’t choose to take physical revenge on her parents for their horrible treatment of her. But there was also a moment when it seemed like Matilda was going to forgive them, and perhaps even stay with them simply because they were her parents. And I had a visceral reaction to that moment of forgiveness. My reaction was, “No, don’t do it!”

How could she forgive her parents, this child who had been entrusted into their care, this little girl, this miracle who they had treated with such contempt and unkindness as they tried to crush her spirit and turn her into a stunted reflection of themselves? It just wouldn’t have been right, for her to forgive them and stay with them.

Even in the moment, consumed as I was by this disturbing story, I knew that my anti-forgiveness moment was a problem. Pastors are supposed to be pro-forgiveness.

When I was growing up, usually when he was contemplating not going to church on a Sunday, my dad would tell me, “You know, God’s in the forgiving business.” And while he was joking around when he said it, trying to get out of doing something that he knew that he should be doing, he was right. It was a joke, but it was also a theological insight. God is in the forgiving business.

So, shouldn’t I, as a pastor, be in the forgiving business? Forget even the pastor part. Shouldn’t I, as a self-professed Christian, be in the forgiving business. I knew that at some point I was going to have grapple with the anti-forgiveness stance

that I took when watching Matilda and today's the day. Because guess what today's readings are about? Forgiveness. Unmerited and unearned forgiveness. Just the kind of forgiveness I thought that Matilda shouldn't give to her parents.

Our first reading for today is from the book of Genesis is the culmination of what is sometimes called, in biblical studies circles, the Joseph novella. The story of Joseph takes up 12 chapters of the book of Genesis making it one of the most complete stories about any person in the Bible.

In that story, Joseph, who is the favorite son of his father, Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, is hated by his brothers. They hate him, in some ways, for the same reason that Matilda's family hated her. He was different from his brothers. He was a dreamer. He kept telling them stories. Stories that they didn't want to hear. He just didn't fit in with them. It didn't help that his father loved him so much and singled him out for gifts and affection.

But none of that justified the brothers in what they did to Joseph. After their father gave Joseph a beautiful multi-colored robe with long sleeves, known in popular culture as an amazing multi-colored dream coat, after Joseph had told them one too many times about his dreams of his own glory, his brothers took him and were going to kill him but then, they decided to make some money off of him. So, instead of killing him they sold him as a slave and told his father that he was dead.

Joseph spent years as a slave working himself up through the household to run his master's home and affairs. Then when that fell apart, he ended up in prison and spent years in prison working himself into the good graces of his jailers. The story has a happy ending for Joseph, with him becoming Pharaoh's right-hand man and having a position of authority in the land of Egypt, but that doesn't negate the years that he had to suffer because of his brothers' cruelty, jealousy, and malice or their intentions to destroy him.

Matilda's story had a happy ending too, but it was very much in spite of her family and not at all because of them.

And at the end of both Matilda's and Joseph's stories, there is a moment of forgiveness. Today's Old Testament reading is about Joseph forgiving his brothers. They, at least ask for forgiveness, even if they're a little bit deceptive about it, and Joseph gives it to them, claiming that it is not his place to judge, recognizing how God had worked in his life and even through the brothers' actions, and promising to care for his brothers and for their families, the text says, "speaking kindly to them." (Genesis 50:21)

I've never been quite as offended by Joseph's act of forgiveness as I was by Matilda's forgiveness of her family. At least his brothers apologized. True, their apology was self-serving. I mean, after all, Joseph had a lot of power over them as the second in command in Egypt. They were afraid that after their father died, Joseph might take his justified revenge on them, but regardless of their motivations, they did apologize. Is that what it takes? Should we only forgive when the one who has wronged us has apologized? Is that the kind of forgiving business that God is in?

Jesus tells a story about forgiveness in today's gospel reading. It's a story that can remind us about the words we pray so often, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

The story doesn't come out of the blue. Jesus tells the story because Peter asks him a question. "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" I think that Peter thought that seemed like a lot, like a generous number of times to forgive. Peter probably thought that he was setting the bar pretty high, offering forgiveness seven times. And yet, Jesus says that it should be more than that, responding to Peter, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:22) Then he tells his parable, about the king who forgave the large debt of a slave. The slave's debt, which he could never repay, was forgiven completely and completely out of the pity and compassion of the king.

The same slave then went out and when he came upon someone who owed him a much smaller debt, a much smaller amount of money than what he had owed the king, he demanded payment in full. When his fellow slave told him that he could not pay and asked for patience, the slave who had had his debt forgiven had the one who owed him and who could not repay thrown into prison where he could work off the debt.

It's a disturbing story as is the behavior of the king upon learning what his forgiven but unforgiving slave had done. When the king finds out what happened, he rebukes the slave and has him tortured until he pays off the entirety of his original debt. Then Jesus says, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matthew 18:35). Yikes.

In the Matilda story and in the Joseph story those characters had been wronged. And yet, in spite of the wrongs that had been done to them, their lives had turned around. They had experienced redemption, not from their abusers, but in spite of them. They had the opportunity to move forward in their lives.

What do you think would have happened to them if they had decided to enact revenge on the family members who had treated them so unkindly? Would they have been able to move forward in their lives? Would they have been able to experience freedom? Would they have been able to experience love and peace? Or would old resentments have strangled them, stifled them, and stopped them from moving forward. If Matilda had turned her parents over to the mafia, if Joseph had had his brothers killed or enslaved or tortured, would the blood on their hands have had destroyed their own lives?

My guess is yes. Their acts of forgiveness didn't just protect their family members, their abusers. It set them free. Because at the end of their stories, Matilda and Joseph were free. They were able to get justice, which is different from revenge, and in their cases, they were able to be free from the power their abusers once had over them without any other kind of action.

You see, forgiveness isn't about not getting justice. It's about not taking revenge. It's not about submitting to one who is hurting you. It's about not trying to destroy that one's life in return.

Those who are being hurt have no obligation to allow themselves to keep being hurt. They can and should seek freedom and justice. And that's what I wanted for Matilda. What I was afraid, when I saw the show the first time, was that she would forgive her family and stay with them. Once I realized that she was going to disconnect from her family, but not seek revenge on them, I was fine. Forgiveness was good for her family and it was also good for her. It helped to set her free. Revenge would have shackled her to them forever.

In the parable that Jesus told, the slave who insisted that his fellow slave pay back his debt had also been set free. His debt had been forgiven. An argument could be made that, because he no longer owed such a great sum to the king, he didn't even need the money that the fellow slave owed him, since his own debt had been forgiven. He just wanted it. And when his fellow slave, who was in the same situation that he himself had just been in, asked not for forgiveness, but for patience and time, the slave didn't give it to him. And in this action of unforgiveness, the slave enslaved himself. He trapped himself back in system of debt and obligation and revenge. He had been free, but his own unwillingness to forgive, to set another free, made him a slave again.

Jesus calls us to be free of that, systems of debt and obligation, systems of guilt and revenge. Jesus calls us to be free, not of justice, but of revenge. Jesus calls us to be free, because God is in the forgiving business. Our debt is paid and God has set us free. And in that freedom, we can forgive each other, for when we forgive and free each other, we embrace the freedom that God has given us, so that we can be free indeed. Amen.