

Last Sunday Nat and I met with the Eucharistic ministers, like our lovely friends here.

Nat walked us through the entire bulletin, giving explanations and context for the things that we do.

When Eric Mason gets here I hope you can all have an opportunity to do something similar!

When we got to confession Nat reminded us that confession is not about self-flagellation, it isn't about shame.

The purpose of confession is to remind ourselves of what we owe one another.

And I think its important to understand why we confess and why we are called to forgive.

Joseph in today's Hebrew scripture returns from being sold into slavery by his brothers, triumphant.

And his first thought is please tell our father I'm here, and his second is to fall weeping into his brother's arms.

After all they had done and all he had been through he was so happy to be back and they were so happy to have him back that forgiveness came suddenly and easily.

Then our psalm elevates to the highest goal living in community.

This psalm holds a precious spot in my heart, and not just because it is super short.

My alma mater Sewanee has this psalm as its official motto.

It was also the psalm at our wedding, as Schuyler and I's relationship was built on a love of building community.

Ecce Quam Bonum et quam iucundum habitare fratres unum.
Look how good and just it is when kindred dwell together in unity.

And in order to do so one must be willing to forgive, therein lies the justice.

In “Living in Community” by Christine Pohl one of the core qualities of a functioning community is accountability.

The other three are celebration, sacrifice, and hospitality.

All of which are a part of our liturgy.

We are welcomed and we welcome, we sacrifice our time and money and talents and in kind receive, we take accountability for what we have done and what has been left undone, and then at the table we celebrate and share in a meal.

I think Joseph was able to so quickly forgive his brothers because it was so clear and apparent that they regretted their actions, that they were relieved that their machinations had failed to remove their brother from their lives entirely.

He saw their regret.

He saw in that regret their love, and suddenly forgiveness came naturally.

In this part of Paul's letter to the Romans, a community riddled with disagreement and strife and competition, he reminds them and us of the reciprocity of forgiveness.

We are all of us living in Grace, the miraculous all encompassing forgiveness and acceptance and love of God.

The least we can do with that grace is to share it.

Some of you know that I used to live and work in an intentional spiritual community called L'Arche.

L'Arche lived by the principles of community as they were outlined in the bible and defined by Christine Pohl.

Unsurprisingly they are big fans of Psalm 133 as well.

Two of the qualities my community in DC did so well are accountability and celebration.

In terms of accountability one of the most transforming experiences for me was that we regularly and with grace confronted our shortcomings and mistakes.

When an incident or a crisis happened we would come together to debrief what had happened.

The one involved would walk us through the incident in heavy detail.

And it might seem that to do so would shame those involved, but it did not.

Because the goal was not to assign blame, but for all of us to learn and grow and identify ways we could do better.

And to be released from the fear of blame in that fashion, from the shame which would only result in defensiveness was a life changing experience for me.

It helped me to see that my failures were an opportunity to receive help and forgiveness and to learn and grow, and they would not mean that I would lose my community.

Another part of why it was so effective was because we spent as much time discussing and verbalizing what had been done right, what was going well, what each member of the community offered as a gift.

Gifts we all got to benefit from.

We were more forgiving and kind because we knew we would be forgiven, because we had, so many times, been forgiven.

And then together we would celebrate.

In our gospel you will notice that this reciprocal and mutual way of living is so powerful that Jesus himself is changed by it.

In one breath Jesus is telling the people with him that it is not for them to dictate how others live, that instead they should be treating each other with that same forgiveness and grace that they have received.

That one's words and actions and statements of faith are more important than their eating habits.

How truly can one so blind to their own weaknesses show another their strength.

And then, so focused on the people of Israel, he is dismissive of a woman of faith who is in need.

Until she shows him that the faith he was just preaching, the faith he desires so of his own people has spread.

The power of his message of forgiveness and mercy was uncontrollable, the cup had overflowed.

And he realizes that the message has grown, it has changed.

He has changed.

When God is shown how God's message has grown, he knows then that Grace cannot be contained.

The bible has throughout our history been used to compartmentalize and control people, to oppress people, to alienate God's beloved,

and it's true power is that even as a tool of oppression it sows the seeds of the destruction of oppression, breaks down the barriers of separation, by constantly reminding us of the expansive transformative nature of true forgiving love, of Grace.

We are none of us perfect, we need each other to shore up each other's weaknesses with our own gifts.

And we can easily forgive the unkindnesses and the mistakes and the chaos of each other because we ourselves have been so easily and lovingly forgiven.

It is what we will say in the Lord's prayer later.

Forgive us, as we have been forgiven.

It is the reason we confess during this service, our celebration.

For me confession is a chance to remind ourselves that we are fallible, to avoid the greatest sin of thinking we know everything there is to know, and instead we admit that we are always learning and growing and we can do so safely in a loving community.

Christine Pohl says another important thing about these principles of community, she outlines that true community requires sacrifice, sacrifice of time, of ego, of some level of independence and that is why accountability is so important, because the vulnerability that sacrifice reveals, without accountability, is violence.

If we cannot admit what we owe to one another then how can we receive what we are given?

I know many of you have experienced at one point or another, the miracle of community, that what you put into it can return to you gifts beyond imagining.

And as much as we speak up when something has gone wrong, which we must do, we need also to speak loudly when things have gone well, when we have received the gift of each other's presence and each others forgiveness.

So I am asking you this week to think about the gifts this community has, to think about the gifts you have received and to name them.

This summer a group of people developed a program geared towards giving feedback and it has been a gift for me to be a part of it.

You may have heard about it once or twice.

Learning to give feedback well.

It's enormously important, it is part of what I loved so much about during my time at L'Arche, the gift of this feedback.

As you move forward in interacting with that program, and thinking about how you may communicate your feedback, remember that feedback is not just what needs to be better, but also to realize and name what has been working well.

And remember that if you, like our Biblical leaders before us, make a mistake, or struggle to use the tools you have, or like Jesus you learn to change your mind about someone,

Remember, that we are all of us, surrounded by Grace.