

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 17, 2017 – Welcome Back
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Matthew 18:23-34 (NRSV)

FOR REFLECTION

Now as a man [sic] is like this or like that,
according as he acts and according as he behaves, so will he be;
a man of good acts will become good, a man of bad acts, bad;
he becomes pure by pure deeds, bad by bad deeds...

~ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 7th Century BCE, Hinduism

Karma

On the island of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, two institutions were built side-by-side and housed very different populations. One was a facility for elderly people no longer able to care for themselves; the other was a home for troubled boys.

Hurricane Irma hit St. Thomas with full force this week. Four of those troubled boys voluntarily went next door and helped staff move non-ambulatory elderly people out of flood waters and into rooms where they would be dry and safe. When the power went out, they sat with these old people and held their hands in the dark – sharing stories and being of what comfort they could.

Boys who had trouble behaving themselves in a socially acceptable manner while living in a tropical paradise – these boys knew what to do in a crisis and did it – with amazing compassion.

[Source: KPCC]

Would you consider these “bad boys” doing a good thing? “troubled boys” having a good day? “human boys” finding a way to make good choices? Did they see the arrival of a category 5 Hurricane as G-d’s karmic justice for their wrong-doing or just one more storm in their stormy lives? Were they in a hurry to bargain with G-d and repent before dying? – or did they see people suffering more than they were, realize they could make a positive difference for once – and do it?

Any way we think about it, these boys did a good thing. Their house manager declared her deep pride in them – and they are now known to be heroes by millions of NPR radio listeners – and a number of elderly neighbors.

It makes me wonder what their choices will be in the future...if their cycle of bad karma is now interrupted making room for some good karma.

With origins in ancient India, karma is a key concept in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Taoism... [The Sanskrit word] Karma... means action, work or deed; it also refers to the spiritual principle of cause and effect where intent and actions of an individual (cause) influence the future of that individual (effect). Good intent and good deed contribute to good karma and future happiness, while bad intent and bad deed contribute to bad karma and future suffering.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karma>

...Western culture, influenced by Christianity, holds a notion similar to karma, as demonstrated in the phrase "what goes around comes around".

Mary Jo Meadow, a professor of psychology and religious studies – whose Christian Insight Meditation integrates an ancient Buddhist meditation practice within a Christian contemplative prayer tradition – suggests that

...karma is akin to "Christian notions of sin and its effects." She states that the Christian teaching on Last Judgment according to one's charity is a teaching on karma. Christianity also teaches morals such as reap what one sows (Galatians 6:7) and live by the sword, die by the sword (Matthew 26:52).

Most scholars, however, consider the concept of last judgment as different than karma, with karma as ongoing process that occurs every day in one's life, and last judgment in contrast being a one-time review at the end of life.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karma>

Some of you may remember the 1991 movie "Defending Your Life" where Albert Brooks and Meryl Streep, in an afterlife way station, review their lives and find that their ultimate destination depends on how MUCH good or bad or meh you've done in your life over all. Brooks does get one last chance to literally redeem himself... which is a great relief... and also true to the Hollywood pledge to always have a happy ending... a pattern not to be trusted... although, with G-d, anything is possible.

With the concept of Karma – there is an "ongoing process that occurs every day in one's life" – a good choice can turn things around at any point. With the Christian concept of Judgment Day there is a sense that – if I have messed up too many times – there really is no hope for me. The Christian concept of Forgiveness, however, can make a difference.

My college roommate once told me that if Adolf Hitler took Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior on his deathbed, he would go to heaven and I wouldn't. That's not the kind of forgiveness that works for me – and I don't think that is the kind of forgiveness that Jesus was talking about. But maybe he was. I am human and have a penchant for justice and may not be capable of such non-conditional love. G-d knows.

On the other hand, who is to say that in the afterlife we DO have a chance to redeem ourselves? Does G-d stop working with us after death or does our G-d continue the process of redemption? Maybe Hollywood isn't far off....

In addition, there is a kind of forgiveness that allows a victim to let go of the wrong done to them and move on with their life. This often comes up in cases of childhood molestation – where forgiveness is a healing unburdening that is not dependent on the perpetrator's repentance or lack of same. I can see the healing power of unilateral forgiveness in such circumstances – keeping in mind that forgiving is not forgetting – and keeping others safe from that person's ongoing behavior is essential.

But most of the time, I believe that Jesus expected – as do I – that forgiveness is a mutual process that involves repentance and a change of behavior on the part of the perpetrator. That is the point that, I believe, was being made in our parable this morning. The slave was shown mercy – he continued to show no mercy to his debtors – his lack of repentance was made known – and he suffered the consequences – forgiveness was withdrawn.

Now the author of Matthew, a master at coded theology, turned this parable into an allegory for how the Kingdom of G-d works. Instead of ending at verse 34:

And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.

He adds verse 35:

'So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

He makes the case for a kind of Hell. But this is an odd fit with the preceding saying in verses 21-22:

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

In other words, forgive endlessly – which the lord in Matthew's allegory did NOT do in verse 34:

And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.

The end.

The story in parable form leaves the question – do we forgive endlessly?

Or do we demand repentance and behavioral changes as a bargain for forgiveness?

Matthew chooses the latter. So does our penal system.

As Jesus people, what do we do?

What do we believe G-d does?

I like to believe that Hurricane Irma changed those four boys for life. Those good deeds will karmically bring goodness into their lives and they will make better choices as adults.

But when there is no longer a crisis, what will they do?

Will they find that continued incarceration in their facility indicates a lack of forgiveness on the part of society and react to that society with rebellion?

Or will they see that they have a new path to follow that might bring better consequences?

Will they find a calling to become first responders and be heroes for the rest of this lifetime? Or will that be too hard – leading them to less than heroic actions?

Jesus, as much as we like to explain him and make him our icon for specific moral absolutes, Jesus spoke in ambiguities. He seemed to understand life as an ambiguous social experiment – as we humans, at our best, aim for that arc toward justice – often falling short.

But he also taught that G-d's love and compassion extend far beyond our puny imaginations. Karma – like the laws of physics and weather – may teach us that our actions have consequences. But doesn't the Maker of the Universe, our Cosmic Mother and Father, ultimately embrace us like Prodigals and welcome us home?

As much as I might demand remorse from those who have wronged others – and demand the same of myself –

I also believe that G-d's love never ends.

And when we walk through the garden gate and up the path to the front door – we will be embraced and forgiven –

and offered a chance to make better choices for the rest of eternity.

Matthew 18:23-34 (NRSV)

23 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." 29 Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt.

31 When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.

Karma (Sanskrit: कर्म, translit. karma; IPA: [ˈkərmə] (About this sound listen); Pali: kamma;) means action, work or deed; it also refers to the spiritual principle of cause and effect where intent and actions of an individual (cause) influence the future of that individual (effect). Good intent and good deed contribute to good karma and future happiness, while bad intent and bad deed contribute to bad karma and future suffering. Karma is closely associated with the idea of rebirth in many schools of Asian religions. In these schools, karma in the present affects one's future in the current life, as well as the nature and quality of future lives - one's saṃsāra.

With origins in ancient India, karma is a key concept in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Taoism.

...A common theme to theories of karma is its principle of causality. One of the earliest association of karma to causality occurs in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad of Hinduism. For example, at 4.4.5-6, it states:

Now as a man is like this or like that,
according as he acts and according as he behaves, so will he be;
a man of good acts will become good, a man of bad acts, bad;
he becomes pure by pure deeds, bad by bad deeds;

And here they say that a person consists of desires,
and as is his desire, so is his will;
and as is his will, so is his deed;
and whatever deed he does, that he will reap.

— Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 7th Century BCE, Hinduism

...Lotus symbolically represents karma in many Asian traditions. A blooming lotus flower is one of the few flowers that simultaneously carries seeds inside itself while it blooms. Seed is symbolically seen as cause, the flower effect. Lotus is also considered as a reminder that one can grow, share good karma and remain unstained even in muddy circumstances.

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Christianity

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