

Matthew 18:15-20
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“Forgiveness”

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This morning I want to begin with a story about the power of love to bring about personal Transformation. It's the story of a local man, Arno Michaelis, grew up in Milwaukee's northern suburbs, and his journey from Skinhead hatred and violence to love. Today he is a public speaker, author of [My Life After Hate](#), joined with Pardeep Kaleka, the son of the slain leader at the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, they formed Serve2Unite, an organization which engages young people of all backgrounds as peacemakers.

Arno Writes, “I grew up in an alcoholic household where emotional violence was the norm and I reacted by lashing out and hurting people. I started out as the bully on the school bus, and by the time I was in middle school I was committing serious acts of vandalism.

As a teenager, I got into the punk rock scene which for a while was the ultimate outlet for my aggression. But, like any other addiction, my thrill seeking needed constant cranking up, so when I encountered racist skinheads I knew I'd found something far more effective. I joined up for the kicks and to make people angry.

I was enamored with the idea of being a skinhead; here was my chance to be a warrior for a magnificent cause – to save the white race! I truly believed white people were under threat of genocide at the hands of some shadowy Jewish conspiracy. It made total sense to me, probably because nothing else in my world was making sense.

So, I assumed an identity where all that mattered was the color of my skin. I remember one Thanksgiving dinner, when I was vehemently and drunkenly spouting off my views, my mother said to me, ‘Well, Mr. Nazi, did you know that you're one-sixteenth Indian?’ That completely shut me up right there and then, but later that night I went back to my own house and continued to drink beer out of glass bottles – until I broke a bottle and slit my wrist with it. That's how convinced I was that my racial identity was all I had.

Once I'd stepped down this path, violence became a self-fulfilling prophecy so the more violence and hatred I put into the world, the more the world gave it back to me, which of course only further validated my paranoia and conspiracy theories. I wallowed in violence as a means of self-destruction and stimulation. Using white power ideology as justification and profuse alcohol abuse as a spiritual anesthetic, I practiced violence until it seemed natural. With my bare hands, I hurt other human beings over the color of their skin, their sexuality, or simply just for the adrenaline rush. Kids trying to emulate me did much worse.

I radiated hostility, I had a swastika tattooed on the middle finger of my right hand. One time I was greeted by a black lady at a McDonald's cash register with a smile as warm and unconditional as the sun. When she noticed the swastika tattoo on my finger, she said: ‘You're

a better person than that. I know that's not who you are.' Powerless against such compassion, I fled from her steady smile and authentic presence, never to return to that McDonald's again.

It wasn't until I became a single parent at age 24 that I began to distance myself from the movement. I'd lost a number of friends to either prison or a violent death by now and it started to occur to me that if I didn't change my ways then street violence would take me from my daughter too. And once I began to distance myself from the constant reinforcement of violence and hatred, suddenly it began to make much less sense to me. At the same time I began to feel I had an identity of my own – and so for the first time I allowed myself to listen to whatever music I wanted to listen to, and watch whatever TV shows I wanted to watch – not just the ones approved by the white power movement.

Soon I got immersed in the rave scene, which couldn't have been more different from the skinhead scene. While there was still a lot of irresponsible behavior, there was also a lot of forgiveness. I was embraced and accepted by people who formerly I would have attacked on sight, and that was a very powerful thing for me. But it took me a long time to work through my feelings of guilt and remorse for the harm I'd caused.

In 2004, I felt the need to really make a positive impact and speak out publicly against racism and hatred. In 2007, I began writing a reflective memoir and co-founded the online magazine [Life After Hate](#). When I was younger I thought I had created my challenge by declaring war on the world but I've come to realize that responding to aggression with compassion is much, much more difficult than to respond to it with anger and violence.

Forgiveness is a sublime example of humanity that I explore at every opportunity, because it was the unconditional forgiveness I was given by people who I once claimed to hate that demonstrated for me the way from there to here.”

Jesus calls us to some VERY difficult work in the gospel story today. The Spiritual work of repairing relationship after it has been severed. Research suggest many people choose less effective paths; they respond to hurt by causing hurt, as Mr. Michealis did for many years. Others form hateful opinions toward a person or people, but take no actions, sort of stewing in their own hate until hate becomes natural. The third choice is to simply ignore or avoid the person who hurt us.

None of these are Jesus' path. He assures us this precious humanity God has created is worth more effort than these. And especially in Matthew today Jesus is addressing the precious community of the church.

Jesus calls the church to adopt a clear process of love and forgiveness. Jesus' steps are grounded in restoring vitality to our relationships. Jesus talks in specificity here. First, go to the offender in private. If that doesn't work, go to the offender with a couple of witnesses. If that doesn't work call in the whole church. Then, if the person still doesn't come around Jesus says,

“let such a one be to you as a Gentile or Tax collector.” I ask you to put that statement in your recently blessed briefcase or backpack for a moment we will unpack it in a few minutes.

Let’s open our hearts and admit a few things about living in community. First, life together is very hard. We won’t be best friends with everyone, we will have passionate yet diverse opinions about how the community is to be, we will have personalities which clash and styles of working which don’t agree. Life together takes a backbone accompanied by compassion, it takes strong will accompanied by openness, and most of all it requires give and take but not always by the same people, as we seek to navigate life together.

And Secondly, I want to admit life together is absolutely essential if we are to live anything resembling a fully human, fully meaningful life. Faith, Spirituality, even science teaches the essential interdependence of all living things.

So, on the one hand intimacy is exactly what we need if our lives are to burst beyond self-absorption. On the other hand, it would be so much easier to float away to a deserted island. Into this very situation Jesus offers insight.

Jesus makes it clear relationship is front and center for the church, he says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Now, let’s unpack that awkward statement our savior makes at the end, “let them be to you as a tax collector or gentile.” Jesus final piece of counsel implies, “you would like to treat them just as you once did Gentiles and Tax Collectors, voting them off paradise island... but now even Tax Collectors (*like Matthew himself*) and Gentiles are included.” Those we consider enemies and strangers, they are part of God’s community too.

We want to wash our hands of people who have hurt us; avoid them, perhaps even retaliate, but that isn’t the path of God’s people: Here...

Not the Gentiles

Not the tax collectors

Not the difficult people in work, or in neighborhood or in church

None of those people we consider to be impossible are ever quite beyond the long reach of God’s love. As we kick off a VERY busy fall season in the life of this congregation... May we pledge to NEVER be too busy to sit with one who needs a conversation that could lead to forgiveness.

Amen