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Proper 19, Year A (Genesis 50:15-21, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35)
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What would you hold on to if you had nothing left? If everything was falling away in your life, what would be the insight, the conviction, the memory that you would cling to most dearly?

A while back, I was in the hospital room of a woman somewhere in her late eighties. A few weeks before, she had been living in her own small house, playing the piano she'd played all her life, painting the watercolors she loved, fixing herself apples just the way she liked them, cut into thin slivers, for lunchtime each day. But then a wrong step and a fall on a hard wood floor and it all vanished. The broken bone took away her mobility, and the hospital stay eroded her memory. Infections kept taking hold. Now she would be lucky if she made it into a nursing home.

We talked, for a while, about what she would take with her if she went. No to her art books; yes to her family pictures. Except the one of Jane, of course. She refused Jane's phone calls now. She tried to explain how it all started—something with a move and a loan and letters traded back and forth. I couldn't keep it all straight. But she could. It was clear to me that even if Jane's picture didn't move with her, even if nothing else at all moved with her, Jane's memory would, etched with acid.

I've been in a whole lot of hospital rooms at this point. Sometimes, I'm there as a priest; other times, I've been a daughter, or a niece, or a friend. But whatever the role I play, there is always a strange privilege of clarity. Health is gone. Work is done. Often, youth is gone, too. And as all these things that we think of as making up life disappear, the question begins to whisper: What do I want to remember now? What's the most urgent task I have to do?

It's a terribly revealing moment. And it's often a terribly sad one. Because often what's left behind is sometimes just this petty, calcified *thing*, hunkered down like a gargoyle—part anger, part judgment, part grudge. We've all seen it, haven't we? It's in the man who can't remember what he had for breakfast that morning but can tell you how tough the meat was at his last dinner with his ex-wife. It's in the woman who can't remember who came to visit yesterday but can write, in spidery handwriting, the list of relatives who are barred from her room.

None of us plan to be like that, of course. But the troubling truth, though, is that none of them planned to be like that, either. No one *intends* to have love whittled away to something so small. There's a horrible mystery to hard-heartedness, where it comes from, why it takes old. The sclerosis advances over time, and we hardly notice, until maybe we start to want to forgive, and find we can't. The muscle in our souls doesn't work any more, if it ever did. And we have no idea how we got so stuck.

I've thought about these diminished people that I've met—and to tell you the truth, not all of them are on deathbeds or in hospital rooms—and I've tried to figure out what's so seductive about the grudge. Why is forgiveness so much harder than it sounds? Is it just an overactive sense of justice? Is it maybe about wanting to prove some personal righteousness to God? Or it is, perhaps, mistrust of God—wanting to be in charge because it seems that God has forgotten

how to keep order? Just why do we keep these scorecards of hurts and slights, these tallies of calls unanswered and favors unreturned, scratching these little tick marks into ourselves until we bleed?

I haven't been able to figure out the answer. If you are expecting one this morning, you'll be disappointed. Genesis doesn't tell us, nor does the Psalm, nor does Paul, nor does Jesus. I certainly can't tell you either, just how our human hearts got to be so hard.

But the good news is that we don't have to be paralyzed by that mystery of causation. Even if there is not an explanation there is an escape. There is hope, all over the scripture we have heard. Even when we are so far gone as to be but paralyzed with anger, our Christian tradition holds up one of those truths that sets us free.

Strangely enough, it's not a piece of wisdom about how we are supposed to forgive others. But there is, instead, this reminder about how *we* have been forgiven. There is this reminder of how we have been loved. If we pay attention, it has the power to spin our heads completely around.

Paul's the one who states the point most plainly: "We do not live ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord . . . For this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living." We have set up a whole bunch of other truths in our lives that we might think are important—the way we were made a victim here, or the way we were betrayed there, or the way we understood so much better than those other people what it really took to be Christian. But Paul is clear that all of these incidental truths are secondary to the primary one: that Christ loved us and gave himself for us.

We might pick other places to stake our identity. But the overwhelming truth of the Christian life is not what anyone else has done to us, nor is it what we have done to them in return. The truth is, instead, how much God loves us. All of us. Only when that truth is in place can we see rightly, think coherently, act wisely, choose well. Only when that truth is in place are we free.

What happens when we take in that knowledge? It can be sort of awkward at first, because it's not just a question of counting the points of our grudges differently. The scale of things shifts so radically that the scorecard disappears altogether. In the face of God's exponential love, what do our little scratchings of relational calculus mean?

Let me be clear, here: I am not suggesting that we throw justice out the window. If you listened closely last week, you heard a lot in the gospel about bringing our complaints to one another, and dealing with legitimate grievances, and none of that has gone away. Forgiveness, despite what the platitude says, doesn't mean forgetting. But the calling that we hear in scripture today is not only to forgiveness. It's to this whole other way of seeing one another, of perceiving the people who walk around next to us, who live with us and love us and sometimes hurt us. We don't see them with our narrowed and calculating eyes. We see them as God sees them. Maybe, eventually, we learn to love them as God loves them.

I realize that all of this is easier to sign on to in theory than in practice. Forgiveness and love are splendid in the abstract and thorny in the particular. C.S. Lewis wrote that if we want to practice forgiveness, we should start with something easier than the Gestapo, but I question his assumption that great evils are the hardest to deal with. Most of us find the real challenge sitting in the pew next to us.

God has this way, you see, of demonstrating divine love, and then immediately sending us the people who tempt us to forget that love. It's the way that we get saved from disaster only to meet the brothers who betrayed us into danger in the first place. It's the way that we catch a lucky break, and then we bump into a person who owes us money and reminds us how anxious we are. It's the way we come to church and feel so lovely and spiritual and then have to confront that person who just would not stop talking in that meeting last week. It's hard, it's crazy-making, and yet it's a reminder of just how far God's love goes, when we meditate on the reality that, no, none of us are outside the boundaries of grace.

There are lots of stories of forgiveness in my life that aren't fit for the pulpit, but I can tell you a small one that is. I spent a summer in Moscow while my husband was in grad school, trailing behind him as he studied for his doctorate. It was not a happy summer. And, in some weird logic of my mind, it was the Russian people who were to blame. They smelled like stale cigarettes. They bumped my shoulders as I made my way down the subway platform. They dropped the gum on the sidewalks that stuck to my shoes and their cars made the exhaust that left dirt on my clothing. I started to develop a nasty little set of prejudices; I could feel them growing in me, each one a disease, and yet I couldn't stop them. On particularly hot and sweaty days, I didn't even want to. I just wanted someone to tell me how right I was to hate the people I had chosen to hate.

Someone had once told me to try and see the face of Christ in each person. I tried it, and I failed. Nothing struck me as remotely Christlike about the blank faces that passed me each morning, riding up the opposite escalator as I was riding down. But then, I came across something that Paul wrote in Romans, just a few verses following what we heard today: "Do not let what you eat be the ruin of one for whom Christ died." And that became my desperate mantra in the packed streets: here is one for whom Christ died. Here, and here, and here. I couldn't see these people as a source of love. But I could see them as beloved. And it was enough that forgiveness wasn't even the point any more. Being caught up together in God's net of grace was what mattered.

What would you hold on to if you had nothing left? You don't have to be lying in a hospital bed to make the choice about what's going to matter most. We can see one another with human eyes, love one another with human hearts, keep accounts, settle scores, make our tiny selves the measure of what is possible. Or we can take up this broader perspective that is offered to us. We can remember this different truth: "Whether we live or die, are the Lord's." All of us.

God's heart is open to us, and God is waiting for our hearts to open in some kind of answer.