

Over the summer, I started a rewatch of a show I used to watch, and frankly never finished. It's been easily eight years since I've watched any episodes of this show and because of that I had forgotten a lot of the intricate dynamics that exist, well beyond just the main players. The other night, I was reminded of this as I watched a scene play out between a father and daughter, which brought into stark clarity the reality of our lessons this morning, lessons we don't always want to listen to.

Without going into all the nitty gritty details of what's been going on over the course of multiple seasons of this show, here's what you need to know. We've got a dad and he's two daughters. They have been through an immense amount of trauma, with one of the daughters, Sara, coming in and out of their lives frequently, sometimes in ways that are life-threatening. Through the course of a lot of chaos, and again for reasons that do not bear explaining, Sara's sister, Laurel, knows that the danger that has followed Sara through her life has finally caught up to her. She was killed, but only a handful of people know this, a handful which *doesn't* include the girls' dad.

What plays out are a lot of lies and deceptions done all in the name of protection. The girls' dad has recently had a heart attack, Laurel is afraid that one more round of bad or stressful news will literally kill him, or at the very least threaten the sobriety that he has fought so hard to maintain.

Laurel thinks that the best thing to do for him is to keep the reality of Sara's death a secret, and so she does...until she can't anymore...

Months have gone by and finally...the truth comes out. Laurel explains her reasons and what has brought them to this point, but she knows her dad finally needs to know. Things go exactly as you would expect them to go, there are tears followed by a lot...and I mean *a lot* of yelling.

Ultimately, Laurel's dad tells her he doesn't want to talk to her, ever again.

The pain is too great, which brings us to the episode I was watching the other night which beamed me over the head with the gospel stick a bit.

Laurel has continued to fight and push and try to maintain some form of contact with her dad, unwilling to let their relationship fall apart, especially when she feels that her motivations, though flawed, were done in the name of love. She goes to his office and finally just tells him she's not going to quit trying. They're all the other has left and she's not going to lose him, not after they have lost so much, so she tells him to yell, scream, get it all out, let her have it, and then maybe they can move on. It doesn't take much prompting, yelling ensues but it doesn't end how Laurel intends, there is no reconciliation here, only her dad telling her, "You're my daughter, and I will always love you, but I don't think that I can ever forgive you." End of story. He kicks her out and that's that.

This whole scene brought into sharp relief for me the reality that for as often as we as the church talk about forgiveness, as often as we as Christians promote it as one of our ideals, it is an extremely fraught and tricky thing when it's brought to bear in the reality of life. I mean, in the context of this show, Laurel felt her reasons were justified, that she had explained herself, apologized, and that should be enough. For her dad, nothing would ever be enough because the pain was so layered and multi-faceted that no amount of explanations can surmount it. And sure this is tv, but at the same time, it's life, isn't it? When the rubber meets the road when we talk about forgiveness, it's never about forgiving the person who dinged your car, or forgiving the harsh word said in a heated moment of frustration with a loved one, it's about the hard, impossible stuff that at the end of the day, in our heart of hearts we do feel is unforgiveable.

Unforgiveable is all over our lessons today. On the one hand, you have Joseph, talk about a dude who has been put through the ringer! His father's favorite, his brothers have sold him into slavery and then faked his death, he is shipped off to Egypt where he has been in jail and tossed between households, only to end up as he second most powerful person in the land, helping the people survive a famine. He is confronted face to face with his brothers who did all of these horrible things and he has to decide

what to do now that their father is gone and he doesn't have to be accountable to him anymore.

Then we have this parable that Jesus tells to the disciples to double down on the question Peter has asked about how often they are expected to forgive. Jesus tells him 77 times, not an indication that time 78 is the time for retribution, no 77 is a perfect number in Judaism, and so the meaning is, you forgive forever, ad nauseum, to infinity, there is no end to the amount of times you forgive. Jesus then explains this by telling the story of a master and two slaves. The first slave has a debt so large it could never be repaid, ever, we're talking *billions* of dollars in modern day terms and yet...the master forgives it, erases it, says it's gone. That slave confronts another who owes him the equivalent of like ten grand in our world, not a small amount of money, but also not billions of dollars. With no perspective on the level of forgiveness he has just received, the slave demands his money, physically threatens the other, and then gets him thrown in jail. Not the best move after having your more money than you can count debt forgiven.

Now, here's the thing...we could talk about grace here and the fact that if we're looking at our own lives with Jesus, Jesus' death on the cross forgave us all of the awful, unforgiveable things that we have done, and thus we need to apply that same thought to our siblings. We are so extravagantly

forgiven that we need to extravagantly forgive in return. However...we all know that life is far more complicated than that. Ok, maybe it doesn't run to the level of Laurel and her dad and the lies about her sister's death, but we've all been through that event, that hurt, that trauma, that when confronted with these lessons we just want to recoil, like really Jesus, but what about the pain we have endured? What about the hurt that was caused? How do we wrestle with forgiveness then?

And that's where I want to flip these lessons around a little bit, because think about it, Jesus was just talking about our life together in faith communities, how we are to treat one another and live together. So what if, rather than looking at these lessons and having the onus put on those who have endured unspeakable pain being in the position of having to forgive to the level of Jesus forgiveness, what if we...dare I say it...didn't do those things to one another which cause grievous harm? What if we lived in a way that didn't demand stretching our imaginations to the scenario in which we have to forgive the incomprehensible thing? And sure maybe that's wishful thinking, looking at the world through rose-colored glasses, but which is the easier to wrap our minds around? Asking someone to forgive billion dollar level hurt or living together in ways that don't cause billion dollar level hurt? Yes, forgiveness is a massive act of love, but you know

what else is a massive act of love? *Not* doing next level harm to one another.

Why should the onus be on the trans teen to forgive their school or their classmates or the church when they have been treated without dignity or respect, when instead wouldn't the easier, the more loving thing be to create an environment that is safe, inclusive, and welcoming, where no forgiveness for harm is needed? Why should the onus be on our black and brown siblings to forgive for the innumerable injustices that they face on a daily basis, when instead wouldn't the easier, more loving thing be to speak out against racism, and work to create communities where violence against our BIPOC siblings isn't just accepted as normal? Why should the onus be on someone within a faith community extended forgiveness when they have been disrespected or ignored or treated poorly at the hands of another, when instead wouldn't it be easier, the more loving thing be to actually be a community of faith that strives to live with respect and care for one another, aiming to not cause grievous harm, instead of trusting that forgiveness will be there, because it has to be because we're the church?

This isn't to say that forgiveness is not vital to who we are. We pray it every single time we speak the Lord's Prayer...as we forgive those who trespass against us. Forgiveness is in our DNA as people of faith, it is what

we rely on and trust, but it also shouldn't be a crutch for bad behavior. We shouldn't operate in the world with a mindset that we can sin willy nilly because God's going to forgive us anyway, and we certainly shouldn't treat one another in a way that just assumes we're going to be forgiven because that's just what we're expected to do.

Forgiveness shouldn't be the expectation, forgiveness should be the thing we have to do when things have gone far off the rails. Love, decency, respect, genuine care of the lives of our fellow human beings should be the expectation. Jesus didn't say Father forgive them as a way to give us a blank check for sinfulness...he said to forgive them because they don't know what they're doing, and sometimes we don't, sometimes the hurt is going to happen and thank God forgiveness is there when it does. But maybe, just maybe we can create a community, a world where forgiveness doesn't have to be the fall back plan and assumption, maybe, we can start with the simple truth, the greatest commandment to love one another. When we see one another for who we are, respect and love the image of God reflected there, when we dare to check our egos at the door and say, we're all in this together, then that's where love can grow and thrive. Jesus said to forgive seventy seven times on into infinity...and I think he would dare us to love one another even more than that. **AMEN!!!**