

Freedom and Forgiveness  
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
September 17, 2017

Exodus 14:19-31. 15:20-21  
Matthew 18:21-35

Who has ever been on the trails at Flat Rock Brook Park? I like to go there sometimes with my family, and I expect in the next month it will be especially lovely to go hiking there because all the leaves will be changing.

If you have ever been on the orange trail-- which you may have noticed because it begins right where the bridge to the playground is-- you may have noticed that where the trail wanders alongside the creek, there are a few places where fallen trees form their own natural bridges across the creek.

Whenever we walk the orange trail, my daughter Kai and I wonder what it would be like to cross the creek on one of those fallen logs. We talk about it sometimes with a sense of daring and adventure, and think of how proud we would be to accomplish a crossing on a real fallen tree. We like to think of how pleased we would be to make it safely to the other side, and the kinds of stories we would tell about our crossing to others. But the truth is, she and I are both very scared to make this actually happen. You see, on the place along the creek where the fallen tree looks sturdy and strong, thick enough to hold me if I was crawling on all fours, it is also very high up. The bank where it crosses is practically a cliff. So if we were to make a mistake, it would be a long fall down to the creek below. The other option is a crossing where the bank alongside the creek is only as high as my knees, and it would not be a far drop at all down to the creek if Kai or I were to fall; however, on that crossing, the tree looks very thin and crooked, so I am not sure that it could hold either of us up securely. And of course, I would

never put my child in danger of crossing something unsafe. But I admit it is still very interesting to think about, and crossing it is a fun fantasy to indulge safely in our imaginations.

When the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds, they did not have a lot of options. There wasn't a sturdy high bridge or a slender, crooked low bridge. In fact, it looked like they did not have any options at all. Pharaoh's army was closing in on them. At one point, they thought that Pharaoh would finally let them go free. There had already been 10 plagues upon the Egyptians: ten terrible things that happened to them each time Pharaoh had refused to set God's people free from the slavery they lived in. The plagues were things like frogs covering the land, even in the Egyptians' bedrooms and ovens, or a darkness that covered the land for three whole days. If you thought the eclipse was amazing, imagine if it happened for three days! Each time there was a plague, the Egyptians would beg Moses to ask God to make it stop. They would promise to be fair and let the Hebrew people go enjoy their freedom. But as soon as the plague would stop, Pharaoh would harden his heart and change his mind. God knew something pretty dramatic was going to happen, so God told Moses to bring the Hebrews to camp out facing the sea. Even Moses did not know what would happen, and when he saw the Egyptians coming after them with chariots and swords, he spoke out of two sides of his mouth. He turned to God and asked, "What were you thinking, sending us out here? Did not enough people die in Egypt that now you would have us die here in the wilderness? We would have been better off living in slavery to the Egyptians." But that conversation was just between Moses and God. To the Hebrews he said. "Do not be afraid! Stand firm! God will save us!"

A Hebrew midrash, or Jewish story that tells more details than what the bible words give us, tells us about a boy named Nashon. Nashon was just one of the multitude of Hebrews trying to escape slavery. According to the midrash, he was the first who stepped into the salty, tumbling waters of the sea as an act of trust in God's deliverance. It was not until the waters came

up to his chest that the sea parted, and the Hebrews could then cross on dry land. It is amazing the kind of courage we are capable of when the stakes are high.

In the Bible, the Hebrews do make it safely to the other side of the sea. Afterward, Miriam-- remember Moses' older sister who watched what would happen when her mother placed her little brother, Baby Moses, into a basket in the River Nile?-- well that girl, all grown up, took a tambourine and led all the women in dancing and singing about what amazing things God could do.

If Kai and I do ever cross a fallen log over the creek at Flat Rock Brook, I'm pretty sure that even though we would have an amazing story to tell, we would still just be Leah and Kai. But that is not what happened when the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea. Because when they were in Egypt, they were slaves. But once they crossed the sea, they did not belong to anyone but God.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus shared a parable about forgiveness. He talks about forgiveness like it is a debt that gets taken away. In the Lord's Prayer when we say "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," that means that we want God to forgive us what we owe God for not acting as God wants us to act-- and in the same way we must forgive others when they owe us for not acting as we want to be treated. And that is a very hard thing to do! Jesus told Peter that we should forgive 77 times-- although in the Greek translation it could also read "seventy times seven times." In other words, forgive more times than you can even keep score.

I find it interesting that the gospel reading falls right before the Jewish High Holiday of Rosh Hashanah, which is the first day leading up to Yom Kippur, the Jewish New Year. One ritual that is practiced during Rosh Hashanah is called *tashlikh*, in which Jews approach a flowing body of water and cast into it bread or pebbles, as a sign of their sins being carried away by the

water. I know last year Rabbi Barry Schwartz led our friends at Congregation Adas Emuno in the tashlich ritual in the waters at Overpeck Park.

Christians also look to God for forgiveness. Our baptismal waters offer the same kind of assurance of God's grace as the waters of *tashlikh*. Some are not so ready to forgive. When trying to see a path toward forgiveness, and freedom from the pain someone else has inflicted upon them, all these people see is the Red Sea at high tide, salty and unwelcoming. Instead of the drive-through convenience of quick and easy forgiveness, there are people who need a more slow-cooked approach to the practice. Episcopal Priest Ann Fontaine has a slower approach to forgiveness. "Today I read Jesus' reply in a new way -- that the 77 times is not for 77 offenses but 77 times it may take before I can let the offense go and fully live into the future."

Our forgiveness should never keep us in harm's way. So for example, if somebody is hurting me in my home, or in my school, I should not just keep forgiving them in ways that allow me to keep getting hurt. That does not help me, or the person who is hurting me.

When we hold onto our anger and our bitterness over someone who has done us wrong, sometimes we become slaves to them. The anger and bitterness lay a claim on our lives and these feelings start to own us. They press in on us like an Egyptian army, and it can be hard to see a bridge or fallen log that we can crawl across to be in a place of deeper peace. To forgive 77 times, or seventy times seven times, can seem about as absurd as the boy Nashon stepping into the salty, rolling waters of the Red Sea, not knowing with any certainty whether the waters will yield to us but trusting that God will somehow make a way for our freedom.

Here is what Pastor Jan Richardson says about forgiveness:

Let us say that to offer the hardest blessing we will need the deepest grace,

that to forgive the sharpest pain we will need the fiercest love,  
that to release the ancient ache we will need new strength for every day.  
Let us say the wound will not be our final home;  
that through it runs a road, a way we would not have chosen  
but on which we will finally see forgiveness, so long practiced,  
coming toward us shining with the joy so well deserved.  
May it be so. Amen.

Children's Sermon: Milly yearned to forgive all those who had troubled her in her life. She forgave her father for naming her Milly instead of Jo Ann, and her mother for passing on to her genes that made her oversensitive to small hurts and slights. She forgave her brother for reading her diary, and her sister for her pretty legs, and her cat for running in front of a truck and winding up pressed flat as a pancake on the road. She forgave everyone who had ever forgotten her birthday and everyone who looked over her shoulder at parties for someone more attractive to talk to. She forgave her boss for being a venomous snake and her best friend for lack of empathy and her husband for making uncalled-for remarks about stale breakfast cereal and burned toast.

All this dispensing of absolution emptied Milly out and made her light as air. She had a sensation of floating, of weightlessness, and it seemed to her that bells were chiming inside her head.- Carol Shields, "Pardon" in Reconciliation (Liturgy Training Publications)