

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A21
15 Pentecost (Proper 19A) 11:00 a.m. Online Eucharist
Sunday 13 September 2020 Congregation Sunday

Exodus 14:19-31
Psalm 114
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

What Is Real? Living from the Heart

"We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves... whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14).

1. What is real? Today we cannot agree about what is really real. In the newspapers, social media and phone calls with people we haven't heard from in a long time we are fighting about what counts as important, who is valued, whose voice should be heard, who has been wronged or hurt.

At the end of the second chapter of his book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau imagines a realometer, settling down far below the surface to the rock bottom level of facts. He says, "Be it life or death, we crave only reality."¹

We got a lot of reality this week. This Wednesday for the first time in our lives the sun never rose and never set. On that dark day of orange skies, the stable earth and sky we habitually take for granted became eclipsed by smoke from millions of acres burning across the West. We can no longer avoid the truth that humanity is destroying this earth, our island home.

These days our fear seems more real than almost anything else. Will the upcoming elections be fair? What will happen if powerful people refuse to accept the results? Will democracy in America survive this generation? No matter how deeply conscious you may have been of racism over the last thirty years these days we cannot help but see this injustice in a new light. There is so much disappointment and pain but also extraordinary and violent denial among fragile white people.

And then there's the pandemic. Authorities lead us to wonder if there will ever be a safe vaccine for COVID. Will we be allowed to do what we love again? Will we ever be really together? Will life ever feel normal? Could we be among the many who die alone? For those who live by faith Jesus brings us back to what is real. In different ways through various conditions, as our life unfolds, he shows us reality.

Last year you held my hand as I learned to be an empty-nester. Now we're re-nesting. Because sophomores are not allowed on campus this fall our college-age daughter is home with us again. And this time she's learning to drive a car. It all starts at a parking

lot in the Presidio. Do you remember that feeling? Suddenly an adult is handing you keys for a vehicle. You have no idea how this collection of several tons of steel and plastic works but at the same time you know that it could kill you and other people.

The dashboard makes no sense at all. You don't know how to turn or stop. You have no instincts for where to look or who should go first, just tremendous power that had always been forbidden before. It's terrifying.

Except... except that there is a reassuring presence next to you. This person knows where to go and intuits what you might be afraid of and gives you confidence to do things you thought were impossible. This person calmly seems to have a plan for the moment when everything spins out of control.

This is what it feels like to have Jesus in your life. We have never existed before and Jesus helps us to find our direction and the best way to use our power. Jesus is the Christian person's realometer. Jesus helps us to see what is merely a distraction and what really lies at the heart of our existence. This isn't some form of magic. Today we celebrate Congregation Sunday. Church, however flawed, brings the spirit of Jesus into our daily lives. And today Jesus offers one of the most important instructions that we could have for navigating our life.

2. Perhaps no one told you this but a central skill for being human is forgiveness. This morning Jesus helps us to understand forgiveness. In a wonderful book on the subject the bible scholar Bill Countryman writes, "Forgiveness is a critical topic for our time... I don't know whether we find it harder to forgive than people of other eras or whether we just have more to forgive, but the inability or refusal to forgive has become one of the great destructive elements in the modern world... We hold grudges... seek revenge. We cultivate victimhood as an identity.... We find ourselves trapped in anger, resentment, spite, dread and hostility – emotions that poison our lives."²

In an intended irony Peter who so soon after this betrays his friend Jesus three times, implicitly puts himself in the place of the forgiver rather than the one needing forgiveness (don't we all)? Peter asks Jesus, "If any member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" (Mt. 18). Seven is the number of completeness, wholeness, restoration (retribution). Jesus responds saying not seven times but seventy-seven times. He's referring to a story in the book of Genesis about Cain's (of Cain and Abel)'s great great great grandson who says that if Cain is going to be avenged seven times, he will be avenged seventy-seven times (Gen. 4:24).

Jesus replaces unlimited vengeance with infinite forgiveness. To explain he immerses us in a dreamlike world of high stakes. Because we're not familiar with the culture or the currency we might miss how bizarre this alternate universe is. A king wants to settle accounts with his slave who seems to have something like a very lucrative license to collect taxes.

After checking the accounts it turns out that the slave owes (in Greek) murion talanton. We translate this as 10,000 talents but really it is more. It is a multiple of the largest number (10,000) of the greatest denomination of currency (the talent). A talent was worth 65 pounds of silver or 6,000 days' wages. That amounts to more than 650,000 pounds of silver or 60 million days of labor. At current silver prices (\$206/pound) that's multiples of \$134 million according to the silver calculation or \$3.5 billion according to the daily labor calculation (using the Federal Minimum wage of \$7.25/hour). Compare this to the mere 900 talents which was the annual income of King Herod the Great.³

This is an incalculable amount – selling himself, his family and all his possessions is not going to cover this. The slave falls to his knees and begs, "have patience with me, and I will pay you everything. If it were not so tragic this promise would seem almost silly. And yet the king feels compassion in his splanknon, in the deepest part of him, and forgives everything. The king releases this man from the world of retribution, from the world where everything has a price. But the slave cannot break this habit and is drawn back into the world he started with.

As he leaves the king the forgiven slave runs into a fellow-slave who owes him denarii. A denarius equals a day's wage (the \$7.25 minimum wage times 8 hours = or \$58). He owes a total of \$580. For this small amount of money he chokes the fellow slave who then begs using his same exact words. But in this case the forgiven slave refuses any mercy. Other slaves alert the king to what has happened and he punishes the first slave. Jesus says, "So my heavenly father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart."

3. Although the point that we owe God far more than anyone owes us is obvious, let me say a few things about what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not a duty. It is not a difficult and discrete task. It is not a way of brushing things under the rug or saying that "he didn't really mean it" or pretending that what was evil really wasn't. It is not making excuses for other people's behavior. It should not be a tool of emotional manipulation, or a reason to stay in relationships that damage us as children made in the image of God.

Forgiveness is not something we engage in on occasion. It is an overall way of walking with Jesus in the world. It is a way of remembering that we are far more often the offender than we are the forgiver. William Temple was the Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II. He writes that repentance isn't remorse. It means to have the mind of God.⁴ This is the attitude of forgiveness and you can't just force yourself to see things this way. You have to receive it as a gift from God.

Earlier I said faith in Jesus involves learning a new state of mind in the same way that we gradually learn the skills for driving. Forgiveness lies at the heart of this. It means embodying the truth of the Good News in our lives. We don't have to constantly be justifying ourselves or always be right or think that our worth comes from having power over others.

Instead we can live in gratitude for what we are receiving from God every day – our life and all its opportunities to serve. We were created for this. When we do we feel God's grace.

After the winds shifted in their little valley in Montana two of our closest friends had only ten minutes to evacuate their house. Will immediately went to help the neighbor collect his horses. Caroline scrambled to pick up birth certificates and family photo albums. Within a half hour their propane tank exploded and they lost everything except their lives.

Here's what happened next. As they drove out through the smoke another car with halts was coming in to rescue stranded horses and cows. At dinner the owner of the restaurant heard what had happened and insisted on paying for the meal. The next day the same thing happened in a pizza restaurant. One of the ladies overheard what happened. She's the same size as Caroline and gave her a box of new clothes. With a choked up voice Caroline told me story after story. She said, "people have been great. No politics. Just kindness. The path of hate is not what is natural to us."

Brothers and sisters goodness, love and forgiveness are more real than our fears. Whenever and however we gather Jesus is in the midst of us like a patient driving instructor who helps us move behind the world of retribution and into the mercy of God's love. This week your homework is to embrace forgiveness – not as a distinct task but as a skill of living, as a quality of your mind and heart. Become more deeply a giver and receiver of mercy. Be a child of God who knows that love beyond measure is the reality at the center of our existence. Live from the heart.

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *The Illustrated Walden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1971) 98.

² William Countryman, *Forgiven and Forgiving* (NY: Morehouse Publishing, 1998) 1.

³ Herman Waetjen, *Matthew's Theology of Fulfillment, Its Universality and Its Ethnicity* (NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017) 200-201.

⁴ William Temple, *Christian Faith and Life* 67. Cited in Countryman.