



Proper 20, Year A – August 14, 2011

Genesis 45. 1-15

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

It began with a simple phone call; a request to provide counselling for a recent immigrant, as soon as possible please. When we met I saw a tall woman, her beautiful black skin accentuated by the blue of her hijab that sat close to her face. Her eyes, big and brown, looked up only briefly to meet mine. Amal and I along with our young interpreter, moved to a small office in the Settlement and Integration Services office.

Her story spilled out. Me looking at her, her gazing alternatively between the floor and into my very soul the words tumbled into one another. The interpreter, a young Canadian nurse of Somalian heritage struggled to tell the story without her own tears getting in the way.

Born of the Yibir tribe, the lowest of all clans in Somalia, relegated to menial labour by the social structures, young Amal had a good life. In a small village she lived with her parents and 11 brothers and sisters. They didn't have much but what they had they shared. (The story of Amal's loss, torture and freedom can be found in the video version of this homily found at

http://www.christchurchcalgary.org/video_stream/video.php?play=20110814104133

Amal, from the age of 12, was other. She was not part of a "we" at all. The phrase "us or them" didn't mean anything to her because there was only "I" and everyone else. And yet, in the midst of that isolation, she still had the ability and the desire to forgive.

In the story about Joseph this morning from Genesis we heard about the ultimate forgiveness. His brothers had sold him just to be rid of him, given him up for dead and received more than they deserved then they came in front of Joseph, a powerful man in the land of Egypt. Joseph's act of forgiveness went even further than just clemency; he ensured the survival of all people of the land, not merely one clan over another.

Amal, this woman who had lived through horrors that are incomprehensible to those of us sitting here, may or may not have been able to offer the same sort of forgiveness to her captures. But she would do anything she possibly could to obtain peace, both for her sake and for the sake of those who were to come after her. In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf asserts that "much more than the absence of hostility sustained by the absence of contact, *peace is communion between former enemies*. Beyond offering forgiveness, Christ's passion aims at restoring such communion-even with the enemies who persistently refuse to be reconciled." When we think of enemies we think of two parties who are both invested in keeping the distrust going - Amal is not an enemy of those who hurt her. She has no vested interest in continuing the battle - what she wants is peace.

The topic of forgiveness is so enormous that it is difficult to wrap our heads around. I have heard Ansley speak admirably on the subject, reminding us that offering forgiveness is not just for our own well being but also will be of benefit to the person who is receiving it. They need to know that they are being forgiven. Perhaps that's why we withhold it - we don't want them to feel OK about what they did. We don't want them to think that there are no consequences for their behaviour and perhaps we even convince ourselves that to forgive would be giving them permission to repeat the offending behaviour again.

If Amal offered forgiveness to her captures, her torturers, would we think more of her or less?

So what do Miroslav's assertion about peace, Amal's story and Christ's passion have to do with forgiveness? Amal, as she sat and told her story, demonstrated a quiet anger and disbelief but ultimately told me that she felt bad for these young soldiers who were as affected by poverty as she was. Amal, as the tears flowed as she named the members of her family, the people who she heard scream as they were killed, showed a grace in the power of God and a confidence in her future that I can only hope to attain. Amal, with the quiet confidence shown by the Canaanite woman at the well, continued to question the status quo and the way things had always been done until she found herself safe in a land far away from Somalia, and continued to fight for her child to be brought to her. She refused to continue to be treated as "other" and quietly became part of "us".

Miroslav Volf, among many other things, says that we must do more than put down our arms and avoid one another to obtain peace—we must wrap our arms around each other in embrace. He describes an embrace as this. First, we must stand unobstructed in front of another, with no barriers between us. Second, we must reach out, showing our intention and our hope to become closer, to become intimate with one another. Third, and this is the most difficult part in difficult circumstances, we must open our arms wide, making ourselves vulnerable to either attack or rejection by the other. For some it must feel like an eternity, standing there, underbelly exposed, wondering if the other might hurt us again. Fourth, we must hold the other to ourselves, body to body, skin to skin, transmitting the beat of our hearts and the heat of our breath. And lastly, every embrace must end. We must let go so that we do not try to become one but rather we separate so that both can be individuals once again.

This is what Christ did for us during his life here on earth. He joined us as an infant, with no barriers between him and the humanity he came to serve. Secondly, he reached out, again and again and not just to those who were considered "us" but even to a woman at a well who was certainly consider "them". And of course, he opened his arms wide on the cross, vulnerable to any who passed, his delicate underbelly exposed to any who might hurt him. And hurt him they did. In his death, in his passing from this world to the next, he held us tight. In his last breath we were warmed by his breath. With his last heartbeat he his heart began to beat in all who had heard his message and who carried it on. For another forty days he taught and listened, spoke and inspired but then, as all embraces do, he let us go. This is the final and necessary step in each embrace. He let us go, trusting that all that he gave us would carry on long after the touching had ceased.

So, like Amal, I pray for the grace to accept what has happened and the strength to move forward in hope. And, like Miroslav asserted, I pray that we learn how to do more than avoid those who we might see as other and move towards a true and lasting peace. And, of course, just as Jesus embraced each one of us I pray that we learn how to truly embrace one another - to approach, to trust, to reach out and to embrace.

And for the gift of God's grace, God's peace and Christ's embrace, thanks be to God.