

Laurie Sedgwick:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Laurie Sedgwick:

And welcome to morning prayers. Please stand as you are able for our responsive reading from the black Appleton Psalter book. This morning, we'll be reading Psalm 40, found on page 20.

Laurie Sedgwick:

I waited patiently for you, oh God. You stooped to me and heard me cry.

Congregation:

You lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the mire and clay. You set your feet upon a high cliff and made my footing sure.

Laurie Sedgwick:

You put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.

Congregation:

Many shall see and stand in awe, and put their trust in you.

Laurie Sedgwick:

In sacrifice and offering you take no pleasure. You have given me ears to hear you.

Congregation:

Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required, and so I said, "Behold, I come."

Laurie Sedgwick:

In the role of the book it is written concerning me, "I love to do your will, oh my God. Your law is deep in my heart."

Congregation:

I proclaimed righteousness in the great congregation. Behold, I did not restrain my lips, and that, oh God, you know.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Your righteousness have I not hidden in my heart? I have spoken of your faithfulness and your deliverance. I have not concealed your love and faithfulness from the great congregation.

Congregation:

You are the Holy One, do not withhold your compassion from me. Let your love and faithfulness keep me safe forever.

Choir:

(Singing)

Laurie Sedgwick:

My inspired text today is from Thomas Merton. "God has left sin in the world in order that there may be forgiveness, not only the secret forgiveness by which he himself cleanses our souls, but the manifest forgiveness by which we have mercy on one another, and so give expression to the fact that he is living by his mercy in our own hearts." Today, the Episcopal tradition pays homage to two saints, but I was particularly moved by and awed by the story of St. Josephine Bakhita. Josephine lived in the late 1800s and grew up in the village of Darfur in South Sudan.

She was kidnapped at age seven or eight from her family, and spent more than 10 years as a slave to multiple owners, and endured unmentionable abuse. Her fate turned to the better when she was bought, a reprehensible term in this context, from her traffickers in Khartoum, by the then Italian vice consul who was a kind person and took mercy on her. For the vice consul's family, Josephine served as nanny and caretaker. And through a number of fortunate events, she found her way in the care of the Canossian Sisters of Venice. In 1883, when she was 20, Josephine Bakhita took her vows and entered the noviciate. Eventually she was assigned to the Canossian convent in the Northern Italian province of Vicenza, where she spent the rest of her life.

St. Josephine was known in her order, province and ultimately throughout Italy for her charisma and reputation for sanctity and kindness. Her life story was published in 1931, and made her famous throughout Italy. Josephine's example of forgiveness is astounding to me. Perhaps this is exactly what Merton was referring to, an act of mercy that so gives expression to the fact that he, God, is living by his mercy in our own hearts, in the heart of another, such that we cannot deny it. Imagine the heroic dose of forgiveness this took on Josephine's part. How did this young woman of 18 years old get to a place of peace and forgiveness after all that she had been through? How was she able to forgive those that had kidnapped and abused her? And ultimately, how did this woman go on to live a life giving of others, joyfully living for God, emanating peace and light, loved and revered by those whose lives she touched.

As I thought more deeply on St. Josephine's ability to forgive, part of a John O'Donohue poem came to mind. And he says, "When you can forgive, then you are free. When you cannot forgive, you are a prisoner of the hurt done to you." Forgiveness, it's such a weighty word. It holds both beauty and strength, and it can be incredibly difficult to forgive someone we feel has done wrong by us. I speak from experience. When we don't forgive, as O'Donohue writes, we carry that unforgiveness with us. We carry that unforgiveness with us, like the ghost from Dickens' tale, condemned to walk purgatory, dragging the chains of all his unkind acts. We carry with us the unforgiveness that we harbor. For many of us, maybe the most important forgiving we need to do is to forgive ourselves. And again, I speak from experience.

If we have compassion for ourselves and our own imperfections, it's much easier to be forgiving of others. So can you, can we, be forgiving of yourselves, as Merton entreats? Consider it an expression of God presiding in your, in our, own hearts. This may be the most difficult, but the most important gesture of forgiving that we can offer. Can you think of someone you might be able to forgive today? I know I can. Maybe that person is yourself. Today, let's live fully into the embodiment of God's mercy by filling our hearts with forgiveness. It may be useful, instructive, inspiring to think of St. Josephine, and Thomas Merton's words if our actions tend toward [inaudible 00:13:26] forgiveness. O'Donohue goes on with his poem. "May your forgiveness still the hunger of the wound, so that for the first time you can walk away from that place, reunited with your banished heart, now heal and freed, and feel the clean, clear, free air bless your new face."

And won't you please pray with me. Dear Merciful One, each of our days are brightened by your presence, and the gifts you bestow upon us. We move freely about our lives, knowing you will catch us if we fall. Sometimes without our knowing or understanding, you guide us on the path that ultimately leads to you, that reflects the goodness and grace that is channeled through us from you. Help us be the embodiment of your awesome love and mercy. Help us not just forgive as an act, but manifest your grace and mercy as a living presence of forgiveness. In the name of the one who is the light of the world, amen. And now please stand and let us recite together the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying:

All:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be name thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Laurie Sedgwick:

And let us sing the hymn O God, the Rock of Ages, number 207, found in your crimson Harvard hymnal.

Congregation:

(singing)

Laurie Sedgwick:

As God's own, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, and patience, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you. And crown all these things with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Amen.