

## SPR | September 13, 2020 | The Rev. Catherine Healy

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Mother of us all.  
Amen.

I love the story of the parting of the Red Sea, but my favorite version comes actually not from the Bible, but from the Babylonian Talmud – where the rabbis are thinking and praying and arguing about the story and come up with a different version that involves a man named Nahshon. And Nahshon is a minor character in the Book of Numbers, but in this story he gets to take center stage: When Moses leads all the people to the Red Sea, and he stretches out his hand over the waters ...

And nothing happens.

And he stretches out his hand again, and he proclaims that God is with him and commands the waters to part ...

And nothing happens.

And the Israelites, all standing on the shore, are starting to get nervous. They're whispering to one another; some of them are thinking about turning back.

Nahshon is the one man who takes a step forward. He walks up to the water and takes another step in. He walks in up to his ankles, and then up to his knees, and people become very still, watching him.

Nahshon gets in up to his waist, and then up to his shoulders, and then up to his nose. And he takes a deep breath, and just as he's about to go under – the waters part.

I love this story so, so much, because sometimes what we need is not almost the magic trick, the miracle of parting the waters, but the faith to take the first step and trust that God will do the good part.

And I've been thinking about this lately as it relates to forgiveness, particularly in the light of today's Gospel. Jesus tells us that we *should* forgive one another as God forgives us, but in many ways, I feel like that's not very useful in our context. We know that we should forgive. The question isn't whether; it's how.

And I am not from a people naturally inclined to forgiveness. The joke about my culture is that, as we age, we forget everything except the grudges. Forgiveness is hard for me. I think, honestly, it's hard for most people.

It's not that I don't know I should, or remember that Jesus commands me to—but forgiveness so often feels like too big of a task to handle on my own.

I'm like Moses, except that instead of the Red Sea, I'm looking at my own anger, and I can see the swells of resentment, and the crests of rage, and bad memories washing over me.

And I stretch out my hand over all that anger, and I will myself to let it go—

And nothing happens.

And I do it again, and I reread those words from Matthew, and I think, *God commands me to forgive and so I forgive you!*—

And still, nothing.

Because when it comes to forgiveness, ultimately, I am not like Moses. But I have learned how to be like Nahshon.

I don't have Moses' power. But I trust that God is more powerful than I am, and if God has commanded me to forgive, God will help me find a way to do it.

So I wade in up to my ankles. And I think, I am so hurt and angry, and I don't know what to do.

And I go up to my knees, and I think, *This person who hurt me must also have suffered, to make someone else suffer so much.*

I get in up to my waist, and I think, *I suppose this person is also a beloved child of God. I could pray for them.*

... *I could pray for something good to happen to them.*

And then, before I know it, I'm in up to my shoulders, and all of a sudden I get hit by another wave. So often, just as I'm beginning to really think about offering my

forgiveness and letting go of my anger and hurt, as Jesus told us to do, that is absolutely the moment when I think:

*But they did cause real harm and I will never be the same and neither will all the other people they have hurt and they don't deserve my forgiveness and they're not even sorry!*

That moment, not the tentative one when I take the first step, that's when I realize how completely, how helplessly I depend on the forgiveness and mercy of God through Jesus. That's when I desperately need God to part the waters: Not when I'm standing on the shore thinking about it, but when all that anger is crashing over my head and I know that without God's help, it's going to take me down.

So, as the wave closes in, I take one deep breath — and, so often, that's when God makes the waters part.

That's when I am finally able to let go, and I know that God has done something in me, has enabled forgiveness in me that I could never, ever find on my own.

I'm making this sound like it takes moments, when, in my experience, it usually takes years. Walking into that water is a slow process, especially when the betrayal has been deep and the harm has been great.

But God doesn't expect us to do it all on our own. Jesus knows that he is asking us to do something that is impossible without him, because perfect forgiveness, ultimately, doesn't come from us. It never did.

This, to me, is the best framing of today's Gospel story, which is in many ways an appalling one. Right?

But the enslaved person who throws his fellow into prison—he isn't expected to forgive the same massive debts as the king. Jesus' point is that he is expected to show a tiny bit of mercy, just to pay forward all the mercy and grace that have been extended to him.

And sometimes even that feels like too much: like too much to ask, like too much to do alone.

But remember, when those waves of anger begin to rise in you, as they do in all of us: God doesn't expect us to part the sea. All God asks is that we find the fraction of faith and trust it takes to face those waters, and walk up to them, and take one deep breath, and step in.

