

September 13, 2026
Proper 19A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Exodus 14:19-31

Psalm 114

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

In the Name of the Triune God whose property is always to have mercy. Amen.

As we gather this morning to begin our annual observance of the Season of Creation, I want to begin with a poem/prayer by Wendell Berry, a prophet of our own time who wrote constantly against all forms of violence and destruction – of land, communities, and human beings. He died on August 31. Let us pray.

"I know that I have life
only insofar as I have love.

I have no love
except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry
this candle against the wind."

The notion of celebrating Creation as a season can be daunting. What bits do we lift up? What other bits do we look past? As you will note in the introduction in your service bulletin, the focus of this year's Season of Creation is *Living Waters*, drawn from Ezekiel 47: 1- 12, which portrays God's life-giving water flowing from the temple of God. In Ezekiel, water flows from God's sanctuary, healing and renewing land, waters, and human responsibility toward creation.

The prophet's vision unfolds amid exile and loss. Water flows from the temple—at first a tiny stream that deepens, bringing life to dead areas and restoring ecosystems. To receive this new life, we must step into the waters ourselves—becoming part of God's river, joining creation's healing.

This is why I asked the Arts Committee, with your help, to create the display of our own sampling of the Waters of Creation which now hangs near the baptismal font. [10:30 It is also why we will return to the font each week of this season to renew our baptismal covenant.]

Each time we welcome a new Christian through baptism [like Gaëlle and Dominic], we recall that water is, in the first instance, a gift from God. To us it represents the waters of creation, the waters of the Red Sea through which the children of Israel were brought out of bondage (as we heard this morning), the waters of the Jordan in which Jesus was baptized, and through which Christ leads us from the bondage of sin into everlasting life. That kaleidoscope of symbols and images, and many more, is contained in every drop of water.

As you may know, I took a watery pilgrimage to parts of the Mississippi River this summer. What started as a one-off visit of curiosity became a whole *megillah*, an unrolling of travel and learning. One Monday in August, I decided to visit the actual point of confluence of the Mississippi and the Missouri Rivers.

I grew up quite close to it, and had crossed the two rivers countless times, but I felt called to stand in that specific place. The path leads you to face south, with the Mississippi on the left, and the Missouri on the right. There was a vista that is almost boundless. So much rolling water and so much stretching sky. “This is so cool,” I thought. “Now I can check that off my list.” Then, I turned to go home.

But what I discovered was that facing north was an entirely different experience. In the same way that the font carries multiple meanings, I was overwhelmed by what I can only call a sense of great mystery.

Seeing the two rivers at the same time, I began to recall long-ago geography lessons. Each river has its own source from the Continental Divide to Northern Minnesota; each has been a transportation route and an economic driver on this continent for millennia; and each has its checkered history, especially the Missouri, a carrier of what we call ‘discovery’ and ‘civilization,’ with all its gifts and all its wickedness and evil. Yet, in spite of our efforts to make the waters behave, they just keep rolling along.

On that day, I felt a shift in myself from seeing nature as an idol, something to be appreciated, to experiencing creation as an icon, being drawn into a kaleidoscope, a miniscule morsel of creation afloat in God’s great gift of water.

Now, I tell you this tale because it is something that happened to me. You probably have your own stories of transformation in the face of creation – the Milky Way, the Northern Lights, an eclipse, an earthquake, a garden, a hike. I tell you this story because I needed, and we need, to be reminded, refreshed in how we see ourselves, because the new life that God promises us requires us to step into the river that Ezekiel saw, to join God in creation’s healing. Part of that healing is forgiveness.

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Today’s lesson from Matthew reminds us that forgiveness is essential to the healing of the human ecosystem, so that we may work for the healing of creation. We hear an echo of Jesus’ instruction on prayer in Matthew 6; what we call the Lord’s Prayer. *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.* Whether you prefer trespasses, or debts, or sins, the important word here is “as.” *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*

Let’s take a moment and think about what we’re actually asking God to do. Do we really want God to forgive us in the same way that we forgive others? Surely, it would be better if God was more generous to me than I generally manage to be for others. The point of

the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is that there is a connection between our capacity to be forgiven and our ability to forgive others.

There is a splendid hymn (H-674) [or, that we just sang] *"Forgive our sins as we forgive," you taught us, Lord, to pray.*

First, a word about the hymn and its author. Born in North India in 1905, Rosamond Herklots trained as a teacher at Leeds University. She taught school briefly, but from 1930 to 1980 she worked as a medical secretary for a London neurologist.

Herklots wrote *"Forgive our sins as we forgive"* in 1966 after digging out weeds in her nephew's garden. As she worked, she saw a vivid parallel between the intrusive, smothering qualities of some weeds and the destructive ways in which deeply buried bitterness and resentment prevent us from growing into the people God intended us to be.

But, forgiveness is hard. "Forgive and forget" is one of those phrases that's repeated so often that we think it's in the Bible. Actually, it's not. Beyond that, I don't think that forgetting is ever really possible. Injuries always leave scars. Maybe a more helpful phrase would be "forgive and try not to weaponize."

This means avoiding responses like, "but what about when ..." or "you always do that." It sounds simple, right? But when you're on my last nerve, when my anger is righteous, and I know that God agrees with me, the thought of forgiving and forgetting makes me feel like a doormat. It's just not fair!

But forgiveness isn't about what's fair. And it isn't about who's deserving or right. It isn't about condoning a harmful behavior. It isn't about denial; spackling over a toxic system. It's not even a get out of jail free card. Forgiveness, Nora Gallagher writes, is "a way to unburden oneself from the constant pressure of rewriting the past."¹

Forgiveness is a gift from God. The simple but mind-blowing truth of the gospel is that God desires and dreams forgiveness for us and for all of creation. Forgiveness is God's go-to place. This is something we forget to remember. Do you ever get caught up in the notion that the Christian life is a matter of keeping a scorecard, in the hopes that God might find you, what, acceptable...loveable? Or that Confession, whether on Sunday morning, or privately with a priest, is about striking some sort of plea deal with God?

Confession, dear friends, is about placing our shortcomings at the feet of a gracious God who has already forgiven us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In today's parable, the king forgives that servant a debt of ten thousand talents – an astronomical sum that could never be repaid. The servant receives forgiveness, but doesn't understand what happened to him and for him.

And in not understanding the grace that was given, he simply turned back to the tit-for-tat way of the world. Does he experience any real freedom? Does he share God's grace with

¹ http://www.explorefaith.org/lifeissues/why_forgive/forgiving_the_unforgivable.php

those who are indebted to him? No. And in the end, the torture to which he is consigned is a hell of his own making.

Well, then, if we're supposed to forgive, I guess we'd better shape up, get out there and get busy forgiving, right? Not quite. Miroslav Volf writes, "It's so crucial to see our forgiving not simply as our own act, but as participation in God's forgiving. Our forgiving is faulty; God's forgiving is faultless. Our forgiving is provisional; God's is final. We forgive tenuously and tentatively; God forgives unhesitatingly and definitively... The only way we dare forgive is by making our forgiving transparent to God's and always open to revision. After all, our forgiveness is only possible as an echo of God's."²

In the font of baptism and in the table of the Eucharist, we are reminded that everything is a gift from God. Let those gifts of water and forgiveness transform you so that you may hear God's call to you to join in God's work in the healing of all creation. And fear not when it doesn't seem to make much, if any, sense; keep stepping into the waters of creation, and listen to the prophets and the poets like Wendell Berry.

Our Real Work

It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.³

Amen. Amen. Amen.

² Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*.

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