

Sermon 2/1/2014

Pete Seeger and the Power of Forgiveness

I have a story that I tell way too much, one of those stories where, before I am more than a few lines in, a family member will yell, yea yea, you told me already. Do you have stories like this? Stories you tell again and again, because they are just that good? Well, here is mine. And if I try to tell it to you again you can interrupt me.

These two monks are walking in India someplace, and the road ends in a bridge over a river. Except the bridge has been washed out in a storm. Now the monks have been traveling all day, and around the road is nothing but jungle. There is no side street to use to get to another bridge- just impenetrable jungle all around. The monks either have to turn around and walk all the way home, or wade across the river. The water is moving quickly but it is only about five feet deep, and these monks are big guys, they are monks built like linebackers, they can wade across no problem. They aren't thrilled about getting soaked, they are trying not to think about what kinds of grossness is in that river, but they can wade across. The problem is that a woman is also on the road, all day she has been about 100 feet ahead of them and while they have not spoken with her, she is clearly a prostitute. The woman is stopped at the edge of the water, crying. She is a teeny little person, much too small to wade across- she would be washed downriver and drowned before she got half way across.

This presents a dilemma for the monks. See, they are not supposed to touch women at all- no handshakes, no hugging, nothing. But if they don't help this woman she will have to take the long road all the way back, and soon it will be dark. Who knows what will come out of the jungle after dark? The monks confer, one saying, it's not our problem that she can't cross. Let's

ignore her and get on with wading across. Rolling his eyes in exasperation, the second monk sighs and shakes his head. He walks over to the woman, and after a moment's conference he picks her up and carries her across the water.

Once safely on the other side, dripping wet and tired, the monk sets the woman down and she is on her way. Soon the other monk has crossed and begins loudly berating his friend for touching that woman. Bad enough to touch a female, but a prostitute? What were you thinking? How could you? Do your vows mean nothing at all?

Through nightfall the monks walk, one in stony silence while the other continues his tirade. Hours pass and still the helpful monk's friend is upset, red in the face and shouting about his indiscretion. Sweat beads on his forehead, the veins in his temples are popping out. Finally the helpful monk stops in the road, sighs, and says "My friend, I carried the woman for a few minutes, across the river. But you, you are still carrying her."

Isn't that the thing about anger? Long after the river journey the anger can continue.

This week our country lost a moral giant in Pete Seeger, a folk singer, authority-questioner, and musicologist who spent decades traveling across this wide and varied land, collecting music that he feared would be forgotten. He learned and preserved the Appalachian bluegrass that is dear to my heart, English ballads cross-bred with Irish reel dances and a big dose of the jazz improvisation that came from African American settlers. He learned the southern songs field hands sang, and the French inspired jazz of New Orleans. He loved American music in all its riotous diversity, different shapes and colors blooming from this same US soil.

But somewhere along the way, after completing a term in the military, after dropping out of Harvard to play the guitar with country folks in the Northeast, Pete ran afoul of his country, or at least so the House Committee on Un-American Activities thought.

Pete Seeger was a questioner of authority, and as a young man he looked around at the bounty of the US and wondered- why are some people so hungry, while food rots on the shelves? Why do some folks have so much and other folks live under bridges? Pete wanted greater equality so he joined the communist party, a move he didn't realize would get him in so much hot water later on. Just a few years ago Pete said that thinking all communists were like Stalin was like believing all Christians were like Christ- it's just not how it is. Ideas get corrupted, people get corrupted. Still, he dropped out of the communist party after Stalin became powerful, after his thousands of abuses began to be known. The blossoming of equality he had hoped for through communism died before flowering.

Pete moved on, making music and singing in churches and schools, protesting the military interventions that were starting to germinate in Southeast Asia. But as the US government became more and more concerned about communism abroad and at home, the House Un-American Activities Council was formed. The council had unprecedented power to overrule the free speech rights of people it suspected of harboring communist ideas, and it subpoenaed Pete in 1955. This was an insane time in US history- entertainers and activists, preachers and politicians were all under the McCarthy microscope, facing jail time for offenses such as Pete's playing guitar at a peace rally co-sponsored by a communist political group.

When Pete Seeger went before the Un-American Activities Council he refused to give any information. You see, the way to escape the blacklisting threatened by the council, blacklisting that meant no longer working in the entertainment field, even being on the radio, you had to give the council the names of people who were doing potentially-communist activities. If you ratted out other free-thinkers, and promised to change your radical ways, you were free to go. Fellow folksinger, actor, and good friend Burl Ives turned in Seeger in exchange for his own freedom, and Burl went on to have a successful career. Pete refused to name names and was convicted of contempt, sentenced to one year in prison. He said "I love my country very dearly, and I greatly resent this implication that some of the places that I have sung and some of the people that I have known, and some of my opinions, whether they are religious or philosophical, or I might be a vegetarian, make me any less of an American."

Every month we think over a different theme, in the worship service and in small groups called chalice circles that are open to anyone. This month our theme is forgiveness, a multi-faceted word and concept that few understand more than Pete Seeger. See Pete loved his country- the rural woodlands of his upstate New York home, the refined posh-ness of his college town Boston, the rollicking rhythms of southern music and life...but his country didn't love Pete, or at least the Un-American Activities Council wasn't so fond of him. After his conviction Pete had a few years of appeals left, so he toured hard and constantly, making whatever money he could and saving it to support his family while he was in prison. And work was hard to come by since he was black listed- no big venues would have him, so he pieced together a living visiting schools and summer camps, hospitals, anywhere he could make any money at all. It was a long fall from considerable fame.

Pete Seeger eventually won his appeal, and although it took a long time to recover his career he always expressed relief that he didn't bow under the pressure of the government. But what about forgiveness? Pete and Burl Ives had been friends for a decade or so when Burl turned him in- ouch. Can you imagine an old friend doing that to you? Trading your freedom for his own? He knew Pete Seeger's kids, his wife, he knew that giving the Un-American Activities Council Pete's name would hurt them all. He knew Pete would end up in that great moral quandary- protect yourself and your family, but implicate your friends in this McCarthy red scare? Possibly spend years in jail? But he did it anyway.

Michael Kobluk, a fellow musician, admirer of Pete Seeger, and member of the Chad Mitchell Trio tells this story:

In the 1950's, folksinger, Burl Ives 'turned' on Pete in response to questions from the House Committee on Unamerican Activities regarding Pete's inferred Communist leanings.

As a result, Pete was blacklisted...banned from television and radio while Ives enjoyed a burgeoning and successful acting career. Though they had been good friends in the 40's and 50's, they never spoke again until a rehearsal in 1995 at the 92nd St. "Y".

We were all aware of 'tension' in the hall as the rehearsal time approached. Burl Ives, confined to a wheel chair, was wheeled out onto the stage for his sound check.

Pete, sitting in the audience with the rest of us, rose, took his banjo and made his way onto the stage. After a quiet word with Burl, Pete gave him a hug and suggested they rehearse the couple of songs they'd sing together at the end. There wasn't a dry eye in the place.

Later on I was driving home, listening to NPR – this time it was the “All Things Considered” news broadcast. Burl Ives had died and they were interviewing folk singer Pete Seeger, talking about Burl Ives’ life. Pete Seeger made the comment that when he thought of Burl Ives, he thought of that clear, strong, beautiful voice of his. The interviewer wanted to probe more deeply into Seeger’s thoughts. What about that time during the McCarty Red Scare, before the House Committee on Un-American Activities? Seeger’s response to the interviewer was, “Sometimes you just have to forgive and move on with your life.”

Here is the thing about forgiveness. It isn’t just about the person you are forgiving. Pete Seeger could have stayed mad at Burl Ives, but why let all that anger simmer in his mind? Why let it take up valuable real estate in his head?

Our director of religious exploration, Chris Polina, and I spend a lot of time discussing what stories to tell the kids of this congregation. Who are the moral heroes who could serve as an example to them? Who could they relate too, - not the ancient heroes of times past but people who are real to them, who inhabit the world they inhabit? Pete Seeger is a great moral hero of today. He didn’t give in to McCarthy-era bullying, even when jail time was on the line. He didn’t turn in his friends. And most shockingly, he forgave the man who betrayed him. He forgave Burl Ives, even when no one expected him too.

This month we will talk in great depth about forgiveness, but today I want us to think about forgiveness in a selfish way. As our monks at the beginning of the story realized, anger can be a burden we carry long after it is necessary, inflicting only ourselves with its weight. As Seeger said, sometimes you just have to forgive and move on with your life.

