

... as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive... Colossians 3:13b

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She was just seven years old. Just a child. Brigitte Sossou Perenyi was seven years old when she was sent to live with her uncle. Her mother told her that day that she was going away to get a better education. But very soon after she arrived at her uncle's everything changed forever. He took her to a shrine. Where she was given away to be a slave, to serve the gods, for the rest of her life. Her uncle had been told by a soothsayer that he was living under a curse – a punishment because of his sins. So he arranged for her to be given away, to atone for those sins; according to a centuries-old practice called trokosi. Over the years, countless thousands of young girls across West Africa have been forced to live and work in shrines; to pay for the sins of their families. And although the practice has officially been banned in Ghana, it still lingers there and in other parts of West Africa on a smaller scale. At the shrine Brigitte was confused and lost. There was no learning; no laughter; no playtime. She endured verbal and emotional abuse from the priest; she was ordered around like a slave. Because she was a slave. But, in the end, she was one of the lucky ones. A charity launched an anti-trokosi campaign. She was caught on camera by a US film crew; and the process for her adoption began. She was first placed with a Ghanaian couple that had children around her age; who raised her in love; who introduced her to God's love in Jesus Christ; the Sabaa family embraced her like one of their own. Eventually she moved to the US; and twenty years after she was freed, she returned to Ghana; to find her family; to try to understand what trokosi really is and why her family had given her away. And along the way she discovered that her parents had never known that she has been given to the shrine; that they had been told that she had died. But she also came to realise that she did not have to remain a victim forever; that forgiving her uncle freed her.¹

If you've been faithfully following the Gospel readings all through the Season of Epiphany, you may be asking yourself what's happening this week. What I mean is this. As you know, we've been exploring a series of Gospel stories, beginning with the visit of the magi to the infant Christ and carrying on to last week's account of Jesus stilling the winds and waves of the Sea of Galilee; stories that speak of the various ways in which Christ revealed his divine wisdom and power and glory; the many different ways in which he revealed his divine nature during his ministry. Whether as a young child in the Temple; or at his baptism; or at a wedding feast in Cana; or on the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Each week we've had a story about something that Jesus did; and each week we've been challenged to think about what that 'something' tells us about him. But this week's Gospel offers us none of that. No miracle; no healing; no great acts! Instead, it offers us a parable. In fact, a parable that seems completely out of season, at least in this part of the world as we sit so firmly in the middle of winter. Not much sowing or harvesting happening around here right now!

¹ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/brigitte-sossou-perenyi/>

See also: "My Stolen Childhood" Understanding the trokosi system - BBC Africa Eye documentary
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AnwkixlhxM&t=122s>

So, what gives? Did the people who put together our lectionary, our system for readings the scriptures, just run out of stories? No more amazing miracles? No more remarkable revelations? There are, of course, lots of stories that they might have chosen, so I think that there's a different reason why we hear this story this week.

And it's something that we first saw last week; in Matthew's account of Jesus and his disciples in a small boat on the waters of the Sea of Galilee; in that terrifying moment when the disciples feared desperately for their lives. Because, as I said last week, the story of Jesus stilling the winds and the waves told us just as much about the disciples as it did about him. While it said a lot about his remarkable power over the forces of nature – both then and now – it said just as much about their faith, or lack of faith; and of that thin line that runs through all of our hearts that separates fear from faith; and terror from awe. The question that they were left with that day on the Sea of Galilee was not just a question about his power; it was a question about them and their lives; and about what difference knowing that Jesus had such power made in how they were going to live their lives. If Jesus had the power to calm the uncalmable, to do what no one else could do, why should they ever again live in fear? Why should they ever again allow fear to rob them of life? Why should we ever again allow fear to rob us of life, if the Lord whom we love has such power?

So maybe this week's Gospel picks up where last week's left off; telling us as much about ourselves as it does about Christ; and maybe the point of connection is fear. The fear that tells us that we have to protect ourselves – whether against the winds and waves of life – those impersonal forces over which we have no control, or the personal forces of friend and enemy alike. Maybe that's why we hear Paul talking this week about putting on mercy and compassion and patience and forgiveness; as if we are putting on the boots and gloves and toques and coats without which we could not long survive a cold Maritime winter. Just as we have to dress wisely if we are to survive the harsh realities of this time of year, so we have to dress gracefully if we are to survive the harsh realities of a broken world. Because, maybe somewhere deep inside we believe that if we're too quick to forgive, others will be just as quick to take advantage; to hurt us in some way or another. And perhaps that's why we hear Paul talking about forgiving others just as God forgave us. Because that's what this week's Gospel is about: about God's willingness to wait until the very last moment to allow us to show who we really are; to show whether we're wheat or weeds; God's patience to not pull up the whole crop just to root out the weeds.

The reality, according to Jesus, is that our lives and our world are a field in which good and evil, life and death, joys and sorrows, live and grow side by side. The wheat and the weeds stand together in our world and in our hearts. That, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of heaven is like. And the words that are translated as "let them" in Jesus' statement, "Let them grow..." can also be translated as "forgive them". They are same words Jesus spoke from the cross when he says, "Father, forgive them". Even then, even on the cross, Jesus is not willing to pull up the weeds. So, there is no place in Jesus' gospel for vengeance, by word or by action, against others or against ourselves. Instead, Jesus commands love. Love your enemy; love your neighbour; love yourself; love God. Maybe that's how the wheat begins to disentangle its roots from the weeds. Maybe love and forgiveness are what life in the mixed field of God's kingdom is like.