Could it all be about posture? About the way we locate our physical bodies, the way we stand or the way we kneel? The way our muscles release and receive? Could it be how we use our hands to reach out?

The story before us is a bodily one - the pace of it is kept by how each character’s body mirrors the heart of the message. Listen again:

When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him…
So the slave fell on his knees…
And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.
But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.”
Then his fellow-slave fell down…and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.”
But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt.
His lord summoned him and said, “You wicked slave! I forgave you…”
And in his anger his lord handed him over to be tortured…

Seized by the throat. Threw. Handed over. Tortured.

It sounds violent, doesn’t it? It sounds violent because it is violent. That’s what anger and resentment does to us. It seizes us. It throws us behind bars. It tortures us.

There is an old parable from the Cherokee Nation that goes like this...

An old Cherokee chief was teaching his grandson about life.

"A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy.
"It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.

One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt, and ego.
The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

This same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old chief simply replied, "The one you feed."

During our Ash Wednesday service this past week, we confessed together and physically unclenched our fists, opened our hands, and asked God to release from us that which binds us and that which we feed:

What we’ve done.
What we feel like we should’ve done.
That which separates us from our neighbors.
That which pulls us away from God.

We opened our hands and in turn, opened our hearts in trust that God’s deepest desire was to be nearer still to us, to us. This is what Lent is about - about returning, again and again to the core of the Gospel: God so loved the world that God would give us God’s only son. God so loved us that God would send a body - flesh and bone and sinew and breath and death - God would send a body to show us the depth of suffering and the height of heaven. God so loved us that God would risk again and again to be in relationship with us - even though our debts are great in number.

Chapter 18 of Matthew’s Gospel is a chapter for the community writ large yet taught to the disciples alone. The Christian ethicist Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz writes how these stories in Matthew 18 focus “precisely on bringing back into the family of God those who have gone astray. It is important to notice that the focus is not just on forgiveness as a private matter, but on reconciliation - bringing back into the fold those who have strayed. Each and every member of the kin-dom [kin - as in family folk] of God has to be a good shepherd, willing to take risks to find and return to the family those who have become strangers.”

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1 Isasi-Diaz, Ada Maria. Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Volume 2, pages 98, 100.
Returning - again and again - to God for - as we said on Ash Wednesday - we are children of God. We belong to God. Returning - again and again - because we are prone to wander and quick to forget. We go astray.

It happens quickly in our story so I’ll say it again:
And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.
But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.”

The pivot from grace to hatred, to violence, to anger happens as soon as the slave leaves the king’s sight. One foot inside as it is in heaven and one foot inside as it is on earth. Released and then bound. It should not shock me so. I do the same thing because this story is a parable - a story of God’s extraordinary and abundant grace from the things of ordinary life. I receive the grace in here at the font - in fact I’m bold enough to proclaim it - and then walk from the sanctuary with my self-manifested to do list drumming upon my soul. My children see me from across the playground and forget that we fussied over wearing a coat at drop-off and then I raise my voice not ten minutes later about who knows what but it sure seemed important at the moment. A friend graciously reaches out after I’ve fallen behind on keeping up and I can’t bring myself to answer the phone. We receive and receive and receive seventy times seven and turn and turn and turn away.

Last year, I gathered with clergy in Durham, North Carolina for a training on nonviolent resistance. We had all participated in various peaceful demonstrations and were preparing to do so again with the public school teachers for a statewide day of advocacy. I don’t know if you’ve noticed but I’m rather short and small and while this helped me win every game of musical chairs as a child, it does not make for safekeeping in a rowdy crowd. During the training, we were taught how to use our bodies as messages of peace and reconciliation - how to stand, how to breathe, how to walk, and how to hold out our hands. It turns out, strangely enough, that one way to diffuse the anger of one coming after you is to look them in the eye, unclench your jaw, and walk very slowly towards them with your arms slightly outstretched and your hands open and ready to receive. It turns out that all the anger and fear and violence and hatred can be released when someone draws near to us in a posture of grace given, given abundantly and with hope that a relationship can be restored.

The kingdom of heaven is like Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel. “Mary, whose only son, Laramiun Byrd, was killed at a party when he was just 16 years old by another teenager named Oshea Israel. While Oshea was serving his prison sentence, Mary Johnson made it a regular habit of visiting him. And over the course of their visits, her grief did not leave her, but her compassion for Oshea grew, until one day while visiting him she burst into tears, and Oshea did the only thing he knew to do, which was to get up” - to move towards with outstretched arms - “and embrace Mary. And they wept together, for all that had taken place. What is more astounding, is that on the day of his release, it was
Mary who gathered her whole family and all of her neighbors and threw him a homecoming party. And now, 25 years later, though they are not family, they claim each other as family.” They claim each other as kin, as part of the kin-dom.

Fell. Released. Forgive.

It sounds hopeful, doesn’t it? It sounds hopeful because it is hopeful. That’s what grace and compassion does to us. It brings us back. It makes us fall to our knees. It releases us. Is the seizing and throwing and torturing still there? Yes. Yes, because we are human and we hurt each other. But is it the whole of the story?

No. In the pain of this story, there is restoration threaded through and it calls us to return - again and again - to the heart of this story: God loves us so much that God would send God’s only son to show us we are already forgiven. The king of heaven is like a man, born of flesh and body and yet holy and divine, who came to walk around the earth among everyday people. It was these people that he asked to become his followers and the ones he would eat and laugh with all the while showing them how to receive grace and return it. They needed a great deal of grace, didn’t they? They would forget his teachings and go astray and doubt him and betray him and yet he still - out of a love so willing and wondrous - he brought them back to the fold. And when those who needed grace the most could only respond with anger and violence and hatred, he did as he’d always done although this time, it would lead to his death. He walked toward them with his arms outstretched and his hands open so that they might know: I forgive you. Yes, even you. Especially you. Especially now.

Especially you. Especially now. All praise be to God. Amen.

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2 This story comes from the Rev. Anna Rainey Dickson who learned about it through The Forgiveness Project. I directly quote Dickson from a keynote address she delivered in 2018.