THE RELATIONSHIP OF HEALING AND FORGIVENESS
James 5: 13-20; Luke 7: 36-50

She was in captivity for 15 months. She was beaten, starved, tortured and raped... But Amanda Lindhout escaped and lived to tell her story. Her book: “A House in the Sky” is a powerful account of what she suffered and how she escaped. Amanda had been a free-lance journalist before that time. Her work had taken her to many places around the world, and many of the most troubled parts of the world. It was in Somalia where she was captured. Many of us followed the story as it was in the news on and off throughout the 15 months.

Her mother was also contacted by her captors. They wanted a ransom. In the end, Amanda’s mother gave over $600,000, which meant selling her home. Thankfully, though, Amanda escaped. She now travels the world as an inspirational speaker offering hope to many.

One of the many powerful things about Amanda’s account is the role of forgiveness in her survival and her healing. Even though she experienced the worst kind of cruelty humans are capable of, she also got in touch with deep compassion in her heart. She discovered the power of forgiveness to overcome the damage of human cruelty.

This past June, 6 years after her release, she was in the spotlight again. Evidently, the RCMP were part of a global sting that drew many international terrorists and criminals, promising them immigration and safety. One of these criminals who ended up in Canada was Amanda’s captor. This news brought fresh memories for Amanda. He was to be tried in Canada for war crimes and she was being asked to testify against him.

In an interview she talks about how difficult this will be. She’s worked through years of healing in body and spirit through forgiveness and an opening to new life. But she also recognizes that forgiveness in her heart will be an ongoing journey. The fact that this man is so close, here in Canada, makes the journey even more challenging. And yet, she will not waver from her commitment to healing through forgiveness. Even though she believes this man needs to be tried and imprisoned like all war criminals, hate is not something she wants to carry in her heart.

Powerful, moving, transforming... Unless real people who have lived such things bear witness to it, it is hard for any of us to believe such forgiveness and new life are possible. Even though Amanda doesn’t speak about God in her life, as Christians we recognize God’s Spirit at work wherever genuine forgiveness and new life get activated.

1) But the larger question Amanda’s story raises for us this morning is about the relationship between forgiveness and healing. Too often today, we think about ourselves as separate parts – our bodies, our minds, and our spirits. But in the bible, and in the experiences of people who have been through some overwhelming experiences, healing cannot be so neatly separated into parts.
Even if there is illness or suffering that may be more physically or mentally evident, more and more scientific evidence is supporting a more ancient understanding of the human as a whole person with body, mind and spirit intertwined in every way. What affects one part affects the other. When we are sick in body it is difficult to pray. The whole focus of our praying changes. Our energy and outlook changes. But how we pray can also shape how we heal in body and mind as much as in spirit. Sometimes we heal and grow in spirit while our bodies fail us. It’s all a journey. But the journey is body, mind and spirit intertwined.

But how is forgiveness connected to healing and transformation? Let us ponder our scripture readings for more direction...

2) Our reading from James is a reading we use at our anointing service which we do twice a year. James refers to the use of oil as a tangible symbol of the invisible healing energy of God through prayer. Healing is not some magic formula. It is a journey. It involves our relationship with God and how that is shaped by prayer. It also involves the presence of other people and our fellowship with them. To be surrounded by others who also take prayer to God seriously, helps boost our own praying and believing also.

To pray to God for healing is an act of faith even when we have doubts about whether it can happen for us. Believing something opens up possibilities that are not there if we close the door on faith. To believe healing is possible and in ways we have yet to imagine in our situation is an act of faith that needs support. Coming to church and participating in worship is a way of encouraging and inspiring faith for healing...

3) But what I want to focus on more specifically through our readings this morning is the relationship between forgiveness and healing. Too often, we separate the healing of body and mind from the spiritual act of forgiveness. In the scriptures, however, forgiveness is seen as a journey of healing that has to be undertaken throughout life.

James refers to sickness in the body, distress in thought and brokenness in spirit together. Confession of sin before God and other people is a prelude to experiencing the healing power of forgiveness. Experiencing forgiveness then opens up a pathway for healing energy to flow from God into us and through us into the world around us. Whether it’s our own personal healing, or the healing of others as we interact with them, forgiveness is the way we become most deeply, gently and compassionately human as God made us to be. Whether our physical disease is fully healed or not, the quality of our lives will be transformed because of who we are becoming through the power of forgiveness working in us.

Amanda Lindhout may have been through a horrifically brutal event compared to anything we will ever experience. But tapping into the power of forgiveness is a journey of healing for her body and mind as much as her spirit. Moreover, people she interacts with are experiencing healing currents through her as well. She can bless others because of who she is becoming.
4) And this brings us to our gospel reading. Jesus has been invited to the home of an important religious official. In that society, a religious official is also an important person of authority in the community. People are respected according to their moral adherence to a religious code of behaviour. Breaking that code no matter your life circumstances, puts you on the outside.

The problem with Jesus is that he is drawn to outsiders. He wants to open the door for them, especially as they are looking for a path to healing and redemption. Some of these people have physical health problems. Some have mental health problems. All of them have spiritual problems. In fact, according to Jesus, forgiveness is not just for those we deem broken in sin. Forgiveness is for all of us. We are all vulnerable and we all accumulate moral debt as we live our lives, make choices, live out consequences and relate to the world around us. We all accumulate moral debt – ‘forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.’

Well, according to the religious official and the code he upholds, people are judged according to how much debt they have accumulated. According to Jesus, however, righteousness is connected to how much you have experienced forgiveness. It’s not about following rules. It’s about experiencing love. Only as we experience love do we have love to share, and only love shared is true righteousness. Rules without love are no rules of much moral value to God. Forgiveness is the form love takes in a world where people sin against one another. Without forgiveness, love has limits. Forgiveness is what opens doors, even those that have been closed by deep hurt, injustice and loss.

And so, even though the woman who comes in and interrupts the dinner is a woman who has a lot of moral debt according to the rules, she has a lot of love because she has experienced God’s forgiveness. If Jesus is God embodied, then his love to her is God’s love to her. To really heal from sin, Jesus declares, you have to experience forgiving love in your heart. For all his zealous moral righteousness, Jesus is also saying that the religious official hasn’t experienced that kind of healing love. He may follow the rules but he is missing the key ingredient for genuine righteousness – love in his heart. In a world of sin, hurt, betrayal and failure, forgiveness is the form love takes.

5) So how do we ourselves access forgiveness so that healing streams may flow more fully through us?

Forgiveness is about letting go. Forgiveness is about accepting what cannot be changed. Forgiveness is about adjusting my expectations of others so that I don’t continue to resent them and judge them. Forgiveness is about taking charge of my life and making a decision for myself, not making a decision depending on someone else’s behaviour toward me. Forgiveness is about recovering my dignity or finding myself in the new situation my life has become. Forgiveness is about changing a broken relationship with someone whether I renew it or let it go and move on. Forgiveness is all of this and more...

But to access forgiveness I need to do something else as well. The woman’s tears of gratitude come out of an experience of forgiveness. To be forgiven she would have come to Jesus. His love shown to her – a generous, forgiving kind of love - opened a
door for her to enter in. The key to that door is repentance. Repentance is acknowledging that something wrong has happened and I bear some responsibility for that wrong. Yes there may have been other factors involved and possibly other people too. But my responsibility is the repentance part. To the degree I claim that bit of responsibility, I experience the healing power of forgiveness as it starts to work through my spirit and shape every other part of my life as well. My healing is not just about offering forgiveness to someone else. My healing is also connected to my claim of responsibility for wrong.

Amanda may be healing through a spirit of forgiveness, but will her captor have the courage and grace to come to his knees in repentance for the horrific harm he has caused her and others? Regardless of what he does or does not do, Amanda has taken charge of her life and claimed forgiveness and compassion for herself and her healing. Through her, others will be blessed and healed. But unless her captor bears the weight of moral responsibility through repentance, he cannot begin to heal himself.

6) Finally, as the spirit is experiencing the healing power of love, the body and mind are affected as well. How we think and how our bodies feel and move are also shaped by our spiritual condition. Numerous scientific studies are coming out on the connection between chronic conditions, disease, mental health and spiritual health. And at the core of such spiritual health is the question whether love in the form of compassion and forgiveness are free to flow fully and abundantly through us. If there are obstacles or blocks, we need to think about where those obstacles and blocks may be and how they affect our overall health.

Amanda Lindhout was very clear where her struggle to be spiritually free was. For most of us, there aren’t those stand out traumatic issues or relationships where it is as obvious. The blocks and obstacles are more subtle. My prayer and hope for you and for me is that as we engage in worship, in prayer and in meditation, God will keep revealing to us where we are still in bondage, where we need to repent and where we need to forgive. And may God give us the courage and motivation to act in order to become more fully healthy and whole where we can, and to accept our condition where we cannot change it. Whether through change, through acceptance and through the wisdom to find out which is which for us, May we experience the healing fullness of God. Amen.

Let us pray: Fill us with your love, O God... convict us to repentance... empower us to forgive and to let go... Amen.