

## Fumbling Towards Forgiveness

Psalm 130:1-8  
Romans 7:18-24  
Matthew 18:21-35

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There's a story about Bill and Frank, two members of the Church Council, who were always at odds with each other. They were constantly arguing, especially during church meetings. When one of them said "yea," you could be assured that the other would say "nay."

So, one day Bill died and arrived at the pearly gates. He noticed how St. Peter was asking everyone a question before they could proceed. When it was his turn, St. Peter says, "Hi, Bill, you've done a lot of questionable things in your life, but we're ready to forgive all that. We just need to ask you a simple question to see if you qualify for heaven. We want to ask you to spell 'Jesus'."

"That's easy," said Bill. "It's J-E-S-U-S." St. Peter smiled. "Great! You're in, but could you do me a small favor and take over here for a while? I just need to check on something. I'll be right back."

Bill didn't mind and began asking everyone waiting to spell 'Jesus' before allowing them to enter Heaven. Just then, he saw his old nemesis Frank coming through the line. "What are you doing here?" asked Frank when he saw Bill at the gate. Said Bill, "Oh, I am just filling in for St. Peter. They are ready to forgive all the bad things you've done, but everybody has to spell a word to get into Heaven." "Oh yeah, what's the word?" asked Frank. After thinking for a moment, Bill said, "For you...the last name of Duke's basketball coach. You've got to spell 'Krzyszewski'!"

We don't do too well when it comes to forgiveness. If someone has done us wrong, our natural instinct is retribution. And we can easily forget the times when we have been shown graceful forgiveness of our own errors and immediately demand that those who have injured us pay up in full. Consider the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Jesus tells this story after Peter's question, "Master, how many times can a companion wrong me and still expect my forgiveness? As many as seven times?" Jesus' immediate response: "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." Jesus is using hyperbole, an exaggeration to suggest an infinite number of times.

Jesus then goes on to tell the story of the servant who owed the king a huge debt, 10,000 talents, an unimaginable amount at a time when a day's wage was one denarius. The king, the one in power who is at the top of the hierarchy of ancient Palestine, acts in an uncharacteristic way. He has compassion for the servant and completely forgives the huge debt which is owed to him. This is unconditional forgiveness, an amazing and shocking act.

However, the next scene shows this same servant who has been pardoned completely, grabbing a fellow servant by the collar and demanding immediate repayment of a trifling debt. His disturbing behavior is reported to the king, who summons him and asks, "Wasn't it only fair for you to treat your fellow with the same consideration as I treated you?" This is the logic of conditional forgiveness. Like deserves like. The King becomes as angry in this scene, as he was gracious in the first. He has the servant thrown to those who will punish him until he can pay back his initial debt, and since that debt was so impossibly huge, it is clear that he will never be able to repay it.

What can we make of this parable? Well, for one thing, we can see that the sin of the ungrateful servant was refusing to connect his own situation to that of a fellow debtor. This is repeatedly pointed out in Jesus' teachings. We all do wrong. None of us is perfectly pure and righteous. We are told to remove the beam in our own eye before trying to take the speck out of our brother's. We should all be part of the crowd that silently dropped their stones and slipped away when Jesus declared that the one without sin should cast the first stone.

Jesus tells this parable in response to Peter's question about how many times he should be expected to forgive. The answer is that forgiveness should be an ongoing act. One must constantly practice it. However, this doesn't mean that the parable is saying that one must accept abuse from someone else. Charles McCollough, a UCC artist and author, has recently written a wonderful book, *The Art of Parables*, and he points out that Matthew's position on infinite forgiveness has "caused untold pain and grief to countless numbers of people over the centuries—particularly to women. For years, women have been told and pressured to forgive all manner of abuse. Worse, they've been made to feel that it is 'unforgiveable' for them not to do so. But should a spouse really forgive an abusive partner 77 times?" (*McCollough, The Art of Parables, Copperhouse:Canada, 2008, p. 209.*)

No, for this would not be consistent with God's love for each one of us and the love that we should have for ourselves. Forgiveness does not mean the sanction of abuse. Sometimes, we forgive another person by removing ourselves from the situation and releasing the negative emotion we carry toward the wrongdoer. This type of forgiveness can occur whether or not the person who has hurt us acknowledges the wrongness of his actions and whether or not that person asks to be forgiven. Forgiveness happens when we let go of our pain and anger, and refuse to let that person's past actions hurt us anymore. Paul Boese said, "Forgiveness doesn't change the past, but it does enlarge the future."

Matthew's parable emphasizes how we all owe a debt of one kind or another. We all have the capacity to do wrong, and we do so repeatedly. Some of our sinful actions are based on our own free decisions, others arise out of an unconscious mix of factors that seem to program us to act in ways that we detest. As Paul says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7:15).

Our behavior can sometimes be predetermined by factors beyond our control. Most child abusers were themselves abused at an early age. Those who grow up in homes with domestic violence are very likely to be either victims or perpetrators later in life. Those who were ferociously bullied as children and youth can find ways to injure or kill others when they find themselves with access to a weapon later in life.

When we can remember how much we are all affected by complex factors beyond our control, then we realize how important it is to forgive. And on a larger stage, we realize that our actions, and those of others, come out of particular histories which are part of a larger history. Richard Holloway, makes this point in his excellent book, *On Forgiveness*. He writes: "'Human history is connected or joined-up, so to make particular judgments about parts of the process is always going to be inaccurate and incomplete. The same point was made by many commentators after September 11, 2001: terrorists are bred by circumstances, they do not come fully formed from the womb of hell.'" (*Holloway, On Forgiveness, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2002, p. 49.*)

Holloway gives a chilling example of this point. He recounts how a young Winston Churchill attempted to persuade the English government to send provisions to Hamburg after the end of the First World War. Churchill knew that their former foes in Germany were close to starvation. But his proposal was coldly rejected by his unforgiving colleagues in Parliament. At this same time, a twice-decorated German soldier sat in a Pomeranian military hospital and learned of Germany's plight and its suffering people from a weeping pastor. That German soldier later wrote, "I knew that all was lost. Only fools, liars and criminals could hope for mercy from the enemy. In those nights hatred grew in me, hatred for those responsible... In the days that followed... I resolved to go into politics." That soldier, embittered and vowing revenge, was Adolf Hitler. (*Holloway, p. 92.*)

Violence begets violence. The ongoing terrorist attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, in spite of years of military strikes. I find it telling that some of our military leaders have spoken up to call for more humanitarian assistance that will increase good will and win the trust of the poor who are in the cross-fire. As Admiral Michael Mullen said so well, when he testified before

a congressional committee, “We cannot kill our way to victory.” (*News and Observer*, Sept. 11, 2008, p. 1A)

Throughout history, however, retribution has been the natural human response to violent acts. In ancient Israel, the people developed laws that would help them manage the chaos of retribution. These were the laws of proportionate response: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. Justice required that the perpetrator be punished, but not excessively. Yet, the violent responses could go on indefinitely in this scheme, and even start to escalate as the feud carried on into future generations.

Jesus brought a new and startling ethic of non-resistance to replace this carefully calibrated system of proportionate response. “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also... You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matt:5, 38-39,43-44).

This seems almost impossible for mortal human beings. How can we do this? In reality, few of us can. This is unconditional forgiveness of the highest measure. However, the great souls throughout history have found a way to use nonviolence successfully in both personal and political extremities. They were able to love their enemies without allowing the enemy to abuse and defeat them. In fact, they resisted the enemy with creative, nonviolent strategies that were ultimately stronger than violence. We remember Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa. We remember Martin Luther King, Jr. in the segregated south, Mubarak Awad in Palestine, the Dalai Lama in Tibet. Perhaps Mahatma Gandhi best knew the power of nonviolence and the strength of forgiveness and love. The old man in the loin cloth who was said to have brought down the British Empire, once said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” Gandhi knew that all persons were capable of violence, but also that each human being carried a spark of the divine, as well. This is the meaning of the Hindu greeting, *namaste*, “I see and greet the sacred in you.”

Gandhi’s last act has been interpreted as an act of forgiveness toward his assassin. Here is a British newspaper account of his death:

*Mahatma Gandhi was shot and killed this evening by a Hindu fanatic. He was walking from Birla House to the lawn where his evening prayer meetings are held and was several minutes late for the meeting. He was as usual, leaning on the shoulders of two grand-nieces, and when he approached the meeting a man dressed in a khaki bush jacket and blue trousers and standing within five feet of Gandhi greeted him with the customary Hindu salutation of nameste - that is; with folded hands.*

*Gandhi smiled at him, and, according to one version, spoke to him. The man then whipped out a pistol from inside his pocket and fired three times at point-blank range.....(Ghandi) raised his hands above his head in the same salutation as he fell. He was carried into Birla House and died half an hour later, at about 5.40.*

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/1948/jan/31/india.fromthearchive>

Forgiveness is only possible when the focus is on individuals, and not actions, when we can see the person behind the evil deed. Hannah Arendt, the German Jewish philosopher and political theorist, points out that we should not focus on the trespass, but on the person who committed it. “We cannot ever forgive a murder or a theft, but we might learn to forgive a murderer or a thief. According to Arendt, ‘By being aimed at someone and not something, forgiveness becomes an act of love.’” (Quoted in Holloway, p. 36).

And this is a careful distinction. We should always be outraged or disgusted by the offending action. Justice demands it. We don't have to condone what's been done. What's wrong is still wrong. It's not letting someone off the hook by saying he or she didn't do anything wrong. It's not denying that a hurtful situation exists. Rather, it is forgiveness of the person, not of the

wrong that person has done. We refuse to let that person's action lock us into the past and deny us our future.

The tragedy of our human existence lived out in time is that our own actions and those of others can never be undone or reversed. When we act unthinkingly in a moment of passion or anger or carelessness and harm occurs to someone else, there is no way to rewind the tape and start over. Likewise, when someone unthinkingly or intentionally wounds us, this is an irrevocable action; it cannot be erased. But, forgiveness can be our redemption from the irreversible past. It is the key which keeps the past from having the power to deny us the future.

An article in the News and Observer a couple of years ago described a courtroom exchange between a killer and the son of the woman he had beaten to death. Charles Dickerson uttered a tearful apology to the son of his woman he had killed, after he was sentenced to life in prison. The son responded, "I forgive you." (*News and Observer, Sept. 11, 2008, p. 4B*). This simple and poignant exchange did not change the facts: a mother was still dead, and her loss would forever be felt by those who loved her. Yet, there was a liberating and beautiful mercy in this scene. It went beyond the careful calculus of quid pro quo justice to approach the purity of unconditional forgiveness. This is not something that should be expected, as it is rare indeed, given our human yearnings for revenge. Yet, when it occurs it is pure grace. I have two friends who have offered this kind of forgiveness to someone else. Chapel Hill residents Tom Fewell and Joy Wood forgave the man who murdered their daughter twenty years ago and are now passionate advocates for the abolishment of the death penalty. I am amazed and profoundly humbled by their example. As Richard Holloway puts it,

*Radical forgiveness...is a miracle of pure unmerited grace, given out of uncalculating love. When it happens, if it ever happens, it casts not only light but silence all around, in which, one by one, the eager voices stop their clamor for revenge and fade away...There are some deeds that are so monstrous they will drive us mad if we do not forgive them, because no proportional reparation is possible, no just accounting, nothing that makes any sense.*

*We cannot press a button to rewind history, to reverse the events of September 11... the dead cannot return, the deed cannot be undone. Nor can the holocaust of the Jews nor the slave trade in Africans nor the genocide of the native American communities nor the ancient miseries of the poor in all places at all times. None of it can be undone, nor can it be appropriately avenged or made sense of. Only unconditional, impossible forgiveness can switch off the engine of madness and revenge and invite us, with infinite gentleness, to move on into the future. (Holloway, p. 86).*

This kind of forgiveness is beyond us most of the time. We fumble towards it, groping in the dark. Yet, we must not give up. Even when we fall, even when we try and fail, even when we can only make small steps, we are going in the right direction. There is goodness in the trying. May we practice mercy and forgiveness- both with others and with ourselves. Amen.