

Forgiveness

Revd Douglas Bannerman

11 September 2005, Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sirach 27:30-28:7; Psalm 103:8-13; Romans 14.1-14; Matthew 18.21-35

“And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Matthew 18:34,35

Today’s gospel is gruesome. Basically you are in trouble if you do not forgive in your heart. What is the heart of forgiveness? I’m not quite sure if I know. Neither am I sure if I am very good at forgiving.

In passing, let us note that the gospel reading has two distinct bits. The first is connected to last week’s gospel concerns about internal church discipline. Already there are rules and regulations. Regulations, schmegulations! We find Peter somewhat anxiously asking a question about forgiveness. Suppose, he asks, another church member sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times? In one of his massively impenetrable pieces of rhetoric, Jesus replies “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven.” — [Matthew 18:21]. Forgiveness, it seems, is beyond calculating.

Then follows what we heard a moment ago — the parable of the unforgiving servant. If you don’t forgive those who have mucked up your life, given you grief, brought you up, not paid your accounts, then your God will not forgive you; so there! In fact your God will torture you until you have repaid your debt. Such, Jesus is quoted as saying, is the kingdom of God.

As I said — gruesome.

We have a dilemma! Is there one rule for God and one for Peter? Or have I missed something along the line? Do I really believe this of the kingdom of God? The answer to that dilemma lies in the broader picture painted by the NT as a whole, which offers something more benign; but I want to stick with the concept of forgiveness, because it is one of the most difficult and misunderstood ideas of the gospel.

Let us follow for a moment, then, the path of the seventy times seven, variously expressed as the second mile, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you — all familiar elements of the gospels which are expanded with the same principle of reciprocity we found in the parable of the unforgiving slave.

Now, I wish to digress into forbidden territory for a moment. My real text for the day comes from the writings Yvonne Agazarian, who explained several ways in which we prevent or defend ourselves from feeling what we are really feeling. Some of them she called barrier defences, shame, guilt, humiliation, and shyness. These are the barriers, she said,

“that guard the threshold of the core of the self ... on the other side of which are the forbidden experiences of love and hate, rage and fear, and grief and joy.” —Agazarian Y (1981) In *Living Groups: Group Psychotherapy and General Systems Theory*. Ed. J E Durkin. New York: Brunner/Mazel]

That bears repeating.

In essence, what she says is that the psyche gets a bit scared of raw, primary emotions like rage or hate. Most of us were brought up to not feel these things. We were not allowed to.

Barrier defences like shame, which actually feel much worse, are like a hedge around the true feeling.

It is interesting that the psyche guards itself against feeling or knowing what is really going on. And it is somewhat dismaying to think that the psyche uses such murky methods. How can shame, guilt, humiliation and shyness, guard against feeling the purer feelings of love and hate, rage and fear, grief and joy? I don't know — but I know that they do. And they also get in the way of forgiveness.

If I feel and express hate, rage, fear and grief, then I am closer to forgiveness because I acknowledge, at the very least to myself, that I am wounded. But if I am beset by humiliation, shame, guilt or shyness, then I am paralysed, imprisoned in a space wherein forgiveness is a passing dream. In my efforts to not feel these dreadful things, not to feel wounded, I blame, I find a way to shift the burden on to someone or something else.

The blame game! Not bad eh? And how much of it do we see in public life today. The pristine models of statesmanship who dwell in the white towers do it all the time. Likewise in the corridors of interpersonal life, most of us are similarly afflicted.

Socrates declared “know thyself.” He, I suspect, would concur with Yvonne Agazarian. To know thyself is to know and experience what is really going on inside.

The way of Buddhism, if I understand it correctly, is a path of dialectic, a path of integrating the opposites, an acknowledgement that most things contain within them their opposite. Love *and* hate, good *and* evil, light *and* darkness, faith *and* doubt... Not one or the other. “Both — And” as Matthew Fox has put it.

The old art of dialectic involved thesis, antithesis and synthesis or integration. For me, forgiveness represents a synthesis of some kind. You have wounded me. I quell the inner response of anger, or hate or whatever and instead feel guilty, or shamed, or whatever — grubby and vulnerable. My impulse is for vengeance, which, if carried out, is self destructive, because the wound is driven deeper.

On the other hand, if somehow I am able to acknowledge my woundedness, my rage and hate, which are perfectly justifiable things in the circumstances, then I am on the road to finding healing. And with healing a synthesis occurs, and forgiveness simply happens, because it does not affect me any more.

So I argue that forgiveness, is not something you actually do; but rather that it is the fruit of a healing process, of integration. That makes it a grace. Forgiveness, if you like, is co-terminus with healing. They belong together, like a horse and carriage. Graceful.

Alice Miller wrote a number of books examining the roots of violence in child rearing. In a chapter entitled *Unintentional Cruelty Hurts Too*, she discussed the problems that surround forgiveness, specifically the now grown up child coming to a point of forgiving a parent for unintentional cruelty. Grown children often feel they have to spare their parents out of considerateness; and so the fear of hurting the parent condemns the inner child to silence once again. Even worse for the grown up child is the situation arising from intentional cruelty or abuse.

Forgiveness is simply not possible in these circumstances, because the pain of the hurt is submerged, back to where it was, and anger has been denied, or rather defended against and covered up by the shabbier feelings of shame, guilt, humiliation and shyness. Protest dies, stillborn, and the soul continues to carry the untended wound. Pain of this nature cannot be resolved until it is recognised, felt, and expressed appropriately. *If the underlying rage has not been experienced, says Miller, the reconciliation is an illusory one.*

We might recall David's encounter with Saul, when Saul has resolved to hunt him down. Listen to this.

“Why does my lord pursue his servant? For what have I done? What guilt is on my hands? Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is the Lord who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering; but if it is mortals, may they be cursed before the Lord, for they have driven me out today from my share in the heritage of the Lord, saying, ‘Go, serve other gods.’ Now therefore, do not let my blood fall to the ground, away from the presence of the Lord; for the king of Israel has come out to seek a single flea, like one who hunts a partridge in the mountains.” —1 Samuel 26:20

There is huge pain in that statement, the anguish of one who has been cruelly disconnected from his family, his heritage and his God. David is saying how it is for him, is confronting Saul with his pain, and thereby gains release to forgive. Rage gives way to sorrow, and with sorrow comes mourning, and when the mourning is successfully completed, life is enriched. And this can be for some a hard, hard road.

So, my friends, I tend not to believe the one who shrugs a shoulder at me and says, “Oh well, I just forgive and forget,” because I will guess that the injury has not been dealt with. Forgiveness must include remembering, but without the rancour of no resolution and without the resignation of no relationship, but rather with careful knowledge. So, in the end, forgiveness is something that happens, an emergent property as it were of healing, with which it is co-terminus.

If you think about it, that is what the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is about. When you know fully, and are living with it openly, then there is life expressing the love preached by Jesus Christ and enriched by the Holy Spirit. As St Paul reminded us in his letter to the Corinthians:

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.—I Cor 13:12