

Ordinary 24 A - 2023

Forgiveness Is Not Innate

William Willimon writes: "The human animal is not supposed to be good at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence, these are natural human qualities. It is natural for the human animal to defend itself, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is not natural. It is not a universal human virtue."

David Garland, in *Reading Matthew*, makes some good observations on the numbers that appear in Matthew 18:21-35.

"In 18:21, Peter asks for clearly defined limits for the obligation to forgive another. He generously suggests forgiving his brother up to seven times for sins against him. It is generous because no mention is made of the offender's repentance. It is biblical, because that is the limit of transgressions God allowed Israel (Amos 2:4,6).

Jesus' response consciously counters the Lamech principle of measureless blood vengeance (Gen. 4:24). One must forgive seventy-seven times (or seventy times seven).

One has learned nothing if one keeps a tally of the number of times one has forgiven another so that when the magic number is reached, one can stop forgiving and mete out punishment. Under Lamech there was no limit to hatred and revenge; under Moses it was limited to an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life; under Jesus there is no limit to love, forgiveness, and mercy."

Then, talking about the parable in this passage, Garland observes that the servant owes his master ten thousand talents, "a deliberate exaggeration. Ten thousand talents was the highest figure in arithmetic (like our billion), and the talent was the highest currency. If one talent equaled ten thousand denarii, as some suggest, the debt would be equivalent to a hundred million working days for the day laborers mentioned in 20:2."

Once again, Jesus reverts to outrageous hyperbole to make a simple point.

Debts in Roman Society

In the ancient world cruel treatment was practiced against debtors, often without regard to the debtor's ability or intention to repay. In Athens prior to the establishment of democratic rights, a creditor could demand slave labor of his debtor or of members of the debtor's family as surety of payment. Roman law provided punishment by imprisonment to the debtors. The reason for imprisonment and cruel treatment was to force the debtor to sell whatever property he might secretly own, or to have the debtor's relatives pay his debt. The creditor would demand slave labor of the entire family so that the debt might be worked off. There were legal restrictions to prevent extreme cruelty, but in spite of the laws the entire system of debts and sureties was recklessly abused in the ancient world. The prophets frequently condemned violations of the laws. (by James R. Davis from *The Unmerciful Servant*)

"In heaven, there are only forgiven sinners.

There are no good guys, no upright, successful types who, by dint of their own integrity, have been accepted into the great country club in the sky. There are only failures, only those who have accepted their deaths in their sins and who have been raised up by the King who himself died that they might live.

"But in hell, too, there are only forgiven sinners. Jesus on the cross does not sort out certain exceptionally recalcitrant parties and cut them off from the pardon of his death. He forgives the badness of even the worst of us, willy-nilly; and he never takes back that forgiveness, not even at the bottom of the bottomless pit.

"The sole difference, therefore, between heaven and hell is that in heaven the forgiveness is accepted and passed along, while in hell it is rejected and blocked. In heaven, the death of the king is welcomed and becomes the doorway to new life in the resurrection. In hell, the old life of the bookkeeping world is insisted on and becomes, forever, the pointless torture it always was.

Henri Nouwen's *With Open Hands - with Children*

We talk about the feeling of being hurt, of not being able to forgive, of that "broken loop" in our head that goes over and over the injustice/wrong/hurt.... and talk about how we "hang on" to that. So, we all think of something that has happened to us that we still "hang on to" (the whole congregation does this). and we close one hand tightly to hang on to it. Then we think of another thing, and close the other hand. Then, I bring out a beautifully wrapped present or a baby doll or a loaf of bread that I break or a communion wafer.... and tell them that God has this beautiful gift to give us, but how can we accept it with hands clenched? We just have to be able to open our hands and set down the hurt/injustice/anger so that we can accept the gift that is always there for us....

And then sometimes in worship we pray with open hands, to remind ourselves.

"There is only one unpardonable sin, and that is to withhold pardon from others. The only thing that can keep us out of the joy of the resurrection is to join the unforgiving servant in his refusal to forgive." - Robert Capon

He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass if he would ever reach heaven; for everyone has need to be forgiven. (by George Herbert)