

Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

It is hard to think of a gospel with such violent extreme. It is like honey and vinegar; sunshine and storm; brimstone and treacle. At the beginning Jesus tells Peter he needs to forgive seventy seven times; he then tells a story that ends with a threat of torture. Jesus' message is that although forgiveness appears to be a very mild, gentle quality, the lack of it will lead to extreme violence. We need to explore how that might be.

It is all pretty common. We have probably witnessed it in terms of angry words. Fred says something to Joe that Joe finds rather offensive; rather to Fred's surprise, Joe retaliates and now Fred is offended; so he has another go at Joe and a real humdinger of an argument flares up. Body language expresses their anger as they point fingers, wave arms and perhaps even begin to hit each other. It may end with them getting exhausted and giving up; it may end with intervention from the police; it may end in hospital.

But perhaps more common is not the open violence but the suppressed anger. Joe is offended but he does not respond directly to Fred. In fact he goes to Dick and complains about Fred and tells Dick what a dreadful person Fred is; and Dick then tells Tom who tells Harry who might perhaps then tell Joe. So half the world is privy to the gossip and the situation is enflamed and everyone is even more angry.

Jesus was very clear that anger was as morally unacceptable as murder:

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire.

Matthew 5:21-22

The apostle James was also clear about the dangers of gossip:

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. James 3:5-8

And of course we can all see it happening in the world of politics whether it is North Korea and the United States or David Davis and Jean Claude Juncker. But it is always easy to see the fault in politics; we need to look at our own personal failings. Or as Jesus put it

How can you say to your neighbour, "Let me take the speck out of your eye", while the log is in your own eye?

Matthew 7:4

I loved that image as a child. It was, as we used to say when I was a teenager, surreal. The idea of a man walking around with a log sticking out his eye is absurd, laughable. What Jesus may be saying is that when I criticize Donald Trump or Kim Jong Un or perhaps my brother or my colleague, then perhaps I am as absurd as that man with the log sticking six feet out of his eye.

It matters that I forgive because some of the world's greatest evils come from a lack of forgiveness. The bitterness created by bearing grudges destroys marriages, corrupts the children of those marriages so that they can no longer function as mature human beings; they then corrupt their own children. And so prisons and psychiatric hospitals are filled with men and women whose lives have been damaged by others unwillingness to forgive, or even their own unwillingness to forgive. That is the context in which we need to hear the threat of torture. Torture is no longer tolerated in our culture but for most of history it was normal and in most of the world it is still normal. What Jesus is saying is that the refusal to forgive needs the harshest penalty available under law.

So that is why we have to forgive. Because the alternative is a world of personal or political violence. What is harder to work out is how we forgive and how we reconcile it with justice.

Perhaps one way of making forgiveness possible is to make a conscious effort to understand the world of the person who offended me. Over the years I have become increasingly aware of the immense pressure under which many people live: poor wages; poor working conditions; pressure to meet impossible deadlines which makes work demoralizing; disability and illness; a confusingly bureaucratic world that seems designed to prevent people obtaining what they need; unhappy marriages or family relationships. The reality is endless. The person who offends me is not simply an offender: he or she is a person who may well be living with many pressures I know nothing about. But I need to try to imagine those pressures and see the person who offends me as a fellow human being, even a fellow member of the body of Christ. I think that is why the officers in WW1 disliked the men playing football with the enemy: if they knew each other as human beings they would no longer be able to kill each other. Our aim must be to see those who

offend us as human beings in their entirety. That will make it possible for us to forgive them.

Forgiveness is about not holding a grudge; not hating, not despising. But forgiveness is not about ignoring offences. It is not about denying justice. We are increasingly aware that on recent years the church has sometimes prioritized forgiveness over justice: there have been cases where forgiveness has been urged on those who have been abused but justice has not be sought for those who abused. That was wrong.

In the passage we heard last week, Jesus laid down a procedure for dealing with offences. And I think we should take this as applying to adults of equal ability; not to vulnerable people who have been abused; and not where the offence constitutes a crime. The first stage is that you take it up with the person who offended you. That advice is totally unambiguous. If some one upsets you tell him or her face to face. You do not gossip about it. You do not tell half the congregation. You do not even tell me. You tell Tom, Dick or Harriet, the person who offended you. That is about honesty. And that is hard. There can be no doubt. But going behind peoples backs leads to bitterness and resentment and more anger. So the first stage of forgiveness is to be honest the person who has offended you.

And of course the best possible outcome is that the person who has offended you apologizes. And it is also the most likely outcome, not least because it is so much easier to back down in private than if you are accused in front of others. I am sure you have been there. If someone comes to me in private and says I was really upset because of what you said to me yesterday or what you did, I am extremely likely to apologize profusely – because I do not actually want to cause offence. Most people do not want to cause offence. And in my experience may people who do cause offence do so out of fear and anxiety. They are coming from a position of weakness, not strength.

Only then, said Jesus, do you go more public, if the person who offended you does not back down. But even then you do not tell everyone: you take along one or two witnesses. But of course this raises the stakes. I now have to make the accusation in front of another person. And it concentrates my mind: is the offence real, am I quite sure? And note that you do not simply tell another person – you make the accusation to the offender in person but in the presence of a witness.

Only then do you go a little wider.

But note the final outcome: if the church as a body finds the offender guilty then Jesus' advice is 'let such as one be to you as a gentile or tax collectors.'

There is a joke here is there not? Do you recall how Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors? He invited them to dinner!

His treatment of them was in stark contrast to the way the Jewish leaders treated them. The Jewish hierarchy disdained them, despised them; looked down their noses at them. Jesus loved them. He loved them because they were sinners; he loved them because they were not his followers – or at least not yet. He knew that if he was going to get them into the kingdom he had to love them in, not bully them. Perhaps Jesus advice 'let such as one be to you as a gentile or tax collectors' has exactly the same meaning as 'love your enemies'.

But because you love your enemies, it does not follow that they cease to be your enemies. Nor does it mean that the offence does not matter. Jesus was very clear about that. There is a famous story, recounted in John's gospel, of a woman taken in adultery. 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone says Jesus.' And no-one does. To use the earlier image they all become aware of the logs in their own eyes. Jesus shows the same compassion as he says 'Neither do I condemn you.; But the sting is in the tail

'Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

Forgiveness is not about ignoring the sin, the offence. Forgiveness is about my attitude to fellow human being. Forgiveness is obligatory. And so is repentance.

N Clews
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