

The Gospel We Don't Want to Hear (Or Preach)

Gen. 45:1-15; Luke 6:27-36; 37-42

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It was a little over two years ago when I finally admitted to myself that there was something at the very heart of our Christian gospel that I not only did not want to hear, but that I no longer knew how to preach.

It was January. I had a preaching engagement coming around the bend at a New York City church where one of my former students is serving as associate pastor—a church that follows the common lectionary in its preaching. So I turned to see what the texts were for the 7th Sunday after Epiphany. The first text I read was the Gospel text from Luke. All I needed was the first line to let me know that I didn't want to touch this one with a ten-foot pole. "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

I still remember sitting in my study at home and literally groaning aloud as I read that text because, you see, at the time I bore within me a deep and abiding rage over an injustice that had been committed toward a friend of mine. And the last thing I wanted to hear was a gospel that required me to love my enemies and to forgive those who had done such evil.

It seemed to me at the time a cheap grace—one that required restitution of relationship at the expense of any communal demand for righteousness and justice, forgiveness without any sign of repentance or change of heart on the part of the enemy, love without any admission on the part of evildoers that their deeds had been love-less. Not only did I not want to hear this Gospel; I knew I was in no place in my personal life to preach it convincingly. So, I moved on to the Old Testament, thinking surely there I would find an escape from such gospel-speech.

But there I encountered the Old Testament text, the text where Joseph not only forgives his brothers who sold him into slavery years before—without any sign whatsoever that they are penitent (indeed they seem a lot more fearful than penitent in this text). Joseph also tells them that God meant all this for good, and how glad he is that he was able to come before them to Egypt so that he could provide food for them in their time of famine.

By this time my groaning had turned to moaning, and I began to see that there was no escape here. I even began to think that God—with some perverted sense of divine humor—had sent me these texts as the Protestant equivalent of self-flagellation, so that I would have to live with them and wrestle with them, and clean up my own act in the process.

So, for two days, I tried. I read commentaries, I prayed, and I pulled off my shelf Martin Luther King's book of sermons entitled *Strength to Love* so that I could glean wisdom from someone who knew what it was to have real enemies, and to face real injustice, and to wrestle with these texts in light of a horribly sinful reality. And then I dutifully called my former student to give her my sermon title for the bulletin, based on those lectionary texts.

My student, however, seemed puzzled. "You're not preaching on the texts for

Transfiguration Sunday?” she said. And then I realized my mistake. Being at home at the time, and not having my trusty Presbyterian planning calendar at my side, I had looked up the texts for the 7th Sunday after Epiphany. But in that particular year, the 7th Sunday in Epiphany was also Transfiguration Sunday. It was clear that the worship at this church had been planned with a Transfiguration theme in mind.

So—seeing before me a way of escape from my ordeal, I eagerly took it. Of course, I said, I would love to preach on that text where Moses comes down from tile mountain after visiting with God and his face shines so much it scares people. Sign me up! And I’ll call you shortly with a new sermon title.

For two years, then, this sermon has lain unfinished—haunting me. Haunting me because increasingly I realized that I did not know how to complete it, that I honestly do not know how to preach that love of enemies and that radical forgiveness that lies at the heart of the Christian Gospel.

I do not know how to preach “love of enemies” and “forgiving as we are forgiven” in a world where women and children are physically beaten and battered in homes, and where the preaching of this gospel in the Christian church has often forced those women prematurely to swallow their own justified rage, has added to the immeasurable burdens they already bear by placing upon them, the victims, the burden of having to *forgive* that abusing spouse, and, which, at its worst, has sent those women back to be reconciled with and to *love* the very ones who place their lives in danger.

I do not know what it means to preach *forgiveness* in a country where Billy Graham, viewed by many as the closest person this nation has to a high priest, goes on national television and pronounces his own forgiveness and absolution of Bill Clinton—before there was any admission of wrongdoing or any sign of repentance on the part of the president. Is forgiveness this easy, this light, this non-demanding?

And I do not know how to preach love of enemies and forgiveness in a world where two former leaders of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia—that regime that we now know was responsible for the deaths of about one million people several decades ago—surrender themselves, asking that their nation “let bygones be bygones”—and in which the prime minister of that land offers to receive them with open arms. Is this what the Gospel means by forgiveness? That we cheapen the death of one million human beings by saying, “The past is past. Let bygones be bygones. Let’s forgive and forget and get on with our lives”?

While our culture and our church often equate forgiving and forgetting, I don’t see that our gospel does. There is too much in these scriptures of ours that speaks of God’s own outrage against injustice and the cheapening of human life—whatever form it may take.

Indeed, it is very interesting to me to note that this passage from Luke’s Gospel about loving enemies is immediately preceded by the “blessings and woes”—Luke’s version of the beatitudes. Listen to what Jesus says here—just before his teaching about love and forgiveness:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they accuse you
and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven;
For this is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.
Woe to you when all speak well of you,
for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.(Lk. 6:20-26)

Whatever we say about “loving enemies” and “forgiving others,” we cannot say that it means a cheap discounting of the unjust actions of others, a quick dismissal of the persecutions borne by those who are victims of injustice, or a facile embrace of the enemy that does not hold the perpetrator of evil accountable to God and others.

Jesus reminds us here that God has a special compassion for those who suffer injustice in this life. They are “blessed” in the realm of God’s reign—not because their suffering is glorified, but because God remembers them and will one day vindicate them.

And as for the evildoers, it is quite clear here—as in other places in scripture—that they will be held accountable by God. When the cosmic tables of injustice in this world are overturned by God, those who once sat at them, trafficking in manipulation and control and exploitation and false accusations of God’s people, will be in a state of “woe.” Their laughing over exploitive victories in this world will be changed to mourning and weeping, as they encounter the God whose anger is always kindled when people do evil instead of good.

Our culture often equates “forgive and forget”—as if they are synonymous terms. But the Gospel of our Lord does not. It is in the very context of God’s promised remembering—remembering those who have suffered evil and remembering those who have perpetrated it—that these difficult words regarding love and forgiveness come. And whatever they mean, they don’t mean that we cheapen the horrific remembrances of those who have suffered great evils by asking them to “forget.”

We cannot ask a woman who has been scarred for life by her husband’s physical or emotional abuse to “forget” it, and get on with her life.

We cannot ask a country that has been lied to time and time again to simply “forget” that reality, and move on with its common life.

And we cannot ask a world that has watched, and is still watching, the slaughter of the innocent by despotic leaders to simply “let bygones be bygones” and move on with its life. To do so is a denial of the gospel, not a true proclamation of it.

Nor does forgiveness, in a biblical understanding, always mean a resumption of former relationships, a *return* to things as they were. In the culture of the church, we have often equated forgiveness with a returning, a patching up and getting on with life as it was, a willingness to go back and commit to the relationship once again.

And surely forgiveness does sometimes mean a *returning*. All of us here could tell stories about occasions in our own relationships and in the relationships of others in which miracles of reconciliation have occurred, where relationships that seemed beyond healing have been healed and restored by the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God and of human beings.

But David Augsburger, a professor of pastoral care at Fuller Seminary also

cautions us against equating forgiving with *returning*. In his most recent book, *Helping People Forgive*, Augsburg writes that forgiveness that is about *returning* can be dangerous and harmful; it can simply be “a restitution of an old order, a backward movement, a regression to the previous situation with the old injustices that motivated the original action or injury.”¹ That kind of forgiveness has the potential to enslave the one who has been wronged by forcing that person to yield once again to old ways of living and relating that are defined not by God but by sinfully corrupt human institutions.

Forgiveness according to the Gospel, says Augsburg, is more about *turning* than “returning.” It is a *revolution*, “a progression into a new situation, a transformation that alters the status quo, that challenges the many compromises that create our systems”²—be they cultural, religious, communal, family, marital, or whatever. “Jesus does not forgive as a means of returning people to the *status quo*. His actions are directed at transforming them, at breaking them out of the limited vision of culture and idol so that they catch a glimpse of the true God beyond . . . the culture’s moral system.”³

One of the dangers I see in the church today is that we too facilely and easily make forgiveness a matter of *returning* rather than of *turning*—and by so doing we blur too quickly the systemic issues that are bound up with the personal ones. We ask people to personally forgive and return to a relationship, and in so doing send them back into systems where there is a radical inequality of corrupted power, and where there is no possibility—until that system of injustice changes—that they will be dealt with fairly and equitably, no matter what the professions of repentance on the part of an individual.

James Cone, systematic theologian at Union Theological Seminary in New York and author of numerous books on Black liberation theology, was recently on the Princeton Seminary campus inaugurating our Martin Luther King, Jr. lectureship. Cone’s address, entitled “Martin and Malcolm—Reflections on Violence and Non-Violence,”⁴ was stirring and deeply challenging in a context where, as Cone himself laughingly predicted, we would have more trouble swallowing Malcolm X than Martin King. But Cone insisted throughout his lecture that both leaders had been critical for the liberation of his people, and he refused to let us too easily dismiss Malcolm in order to embrace Martin.

During the question and answer period Cone most succinctly described his own desire to live within the tension posed by the two when he said (and I’m paraphrasing here): “Martin [King] wouldn’t let me let go of the fact that I’m a Christian. But Malcolm never let me forget that I am also Black. For me the goal of all I’m about is the oneness of all humanity. We were made to live in relationship with one another. But for me that also means that I cannot live in a false relationship with those who consistently demean and devalue my worth as a child of God. I cannot re-enter a relationship with someone who refuses to treat me as a person of worth, an equal. To do so is to return again to slavery.”

It has been interesting to me this time around reading the story of Joseph’s forgiveness and embrace of his brothers, to think about that story not only interpersonally (as I have always done), but also systemically (as I have never before done). When viewed through a purely personal lens, this saga becomes one more incentive for those who have been abused through sick family systems to forgive and to enter back into relationship with one’s relatives, no matter what heinous crimes they have committed.

But if viewed systemically, this story takes on a whole new meaning. Note that in the intervening time between the selling of Joseph by his brothers into slavery, and their encounter in this text, the balance of power in this relationship has also radically changed. Joseph, once the weaker brother, is now the strongest brother—a ruler in Pharaoh’s court with the literal ability to make life and death decisions regarding the lives of those brothers who once abused him.

By forgiving his brothers in this new social context, Joseph in no way signals a *returning* to the old, unjust and inhumane ways of living within his family. Rather, I see in Joseph’s forgiveness a model of the *turning* of which Augusburger speaks.

Instead of using the power now entrusted to him for evil, Joseph uses it for good. Through his act of personal forgiveness Joseph pronounces an end to the status quo order of governance of the world (rule by manipulation, control, and vengeance), and the beginning of a new reign in which the mercy and compassion of God will be manifest in the attitude of the ruler toward the ruled, brothers who are now embraced as equals before a merciful God.

Perhaps we in the church have been preaching the Joseph story to the wrong people. Rather than preaching Joseph to victims, telling them they should repent and forgive, we should be preaching Joseph to the powerful, encouraging them to embrace God’s new way of mercy and compassion, rather than the world’s way of vindictiveness and retribution. Joseph is no model for enslaving servitude. Rather, Joseph models servant leadership, the kind we ultimately see revealed in the one from Nazareth whose own words about forgiveness continue to haunt us.

If Christian forgiveness, then, is not about a facile *returning* that requires no change in the status quo, and if forgiveness is not about a false *forgetting* that refuses to name evil for what it is, what is it? What is Christian forgiveness? Certainly we glimpse something of its radical core in the words of Jesus as they come to us in Luke 6, and in the life and death of the one who spoke those words: “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Christian forgiveness, whatever we say about it, has its tap roots in God’s own radical love for us—a love that is persistently, determinedly, unwaveringly merciful, even toward those totally undeserving of that mercy.

Anne Lamott has a best-selling book called *Traveling Mercies*, a book in which she recounts her own life lived through the lens of her Christian faith. She begins her section on “Forgiveness” with these words:

I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness—that I am one of the other kind. But even though it was funny, and actually true, it started to be too painful to stay this way. They say we are not punished for the sin but by the sin, and I began to feel punished by my unwillingness to forgive. By the time I decided to become one of the ones who *is* heavily into forgiveness, it was like trying to become a marathon runner in middle age; everything inside me either recoiled, as from a hot flame, or laughed a little too hysterically.⁵

Lamott goes on to tell a tale about an ordinary, everyday enemy—the parent of one of her children’s friends whom she calls “Enemy Light”—and of her own long, slow

movement in their testy relationship from anger and a desire for revenge against this woman—whom she felt consistently demeaned her because she wasn't the kind of mother or author this woman thought she should be—to an acknowledgment of their common humanity, and an admission to herself that some of her evil thoughts toward this woman had actually been projections or her own shortcomings.

It was while sitting in this woman's dining room, sharing tea with her while their boys played together, that Lamott says the veil finally lifted, and she finally released and let go much of the anger, resentment, and desire for retaliation she had been holding inside. She describes it this way:

I felt so happy there in her living room that I got drunk on her tea. I read once in some magazine that in Czechoslovakia, they say an echo in the woods always returns your own call, and so I started speaking sweetly to everyone—to the mother, to the boys. And my sweet voice started getting all over me like sunlight, like the smell of the Danish baking in her oven, two of which [my former enemy] put on a paper plate and covered with tin foil for me and Sam [my son] to take home.⁶

Whatever forgiveness means from a Christian point of view, surely it means that over time we Christians have to come to terms with the rage within us—sorting out that rage that is holy and of God (the rage that remembers evil) from the rage that is unholy and motivated by revenge and retribution—and letting some of that unholy rage go so that there is space, once more, for love.

In an article he wrote for *Christian Century* in the aftermath of the surrender of the two top officials of the Khmer Rouge regime, Miroslav Wolf, a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, said the most astonishing part of that story never made it into the headlines.

What was truly extraordinary about the surrender and its aftermath was the reaction of some victims. "When I see them it is difficult to forgive—very difficult," said one person who had lost most of his family during the Khmer Rouge years. "It is just like waking me up when I see them. But we have to forgive and move on."

"Have to forgive?" Wolf asks incredulously. And then he goes on to posit why many of the victims chose forgiveness over its alternative:

For some, the wells from which the tears flow have simply dried up, and the fuel which feeds the fires of anger has burned up; after years of mourning and rage, they are tired and want rest. Others realize that they themselves cannot be healed until they have given up resentment and moved on—with or without justice done.

Still others believe that their moral dignity will not be restored until they have come to love their enemies; they want to forgive, even to let the misdeeds fall into oblivion, because they refuse to let those who have maimed their bodies mar their souls.⁷

Surely forgiveness, in the first instance, means a release, a letting go of the bitterness within so that we refuse to let those who have maimed our bodies or our spirit or our psyches, also maim our souls. The Gospel of Christ never lets us off the hook in that regard. It always draws us, urges us toward a new way of being—not solely for the sake of our enemies, but perhaps, primarily, for our own sake. If we will be truly free in Christ, we need to release that bitterness within that keeps us from experiencing the fullness of God’s own love for us. For some, that sorting through and releasing may take a long, long time. We need to learn patience with ourselves, and with others, in that regard.

But of course this Gospel text calls for more than a release and letting go of the unholy rage within us. Jesus also calls on us to be pro-active: to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who abuse us. We are called to be merciful even as God is merciful.

And that, of course, is where the real rub of this text comes. What does love look like, when it also goes hand in hand with a remembering of evil, a holding of evildoers accountable, and a refusal to discount evil or sweep it under the rug? What does love look like in a situation in which a *return* to a relationship of equality and respect with the other is simply impossible?

I do not yet know what it looks like for me, personally; I’m still struggling with it. In a very real sense, this sermon is still unfinished for me. And I don’t pretend to know what it looks like for you. But I share with you three possibilities that have passed my way in recent months as I have wrestled with these matters.

The first possibility was posed for me in a sermon preached last Valentine’s Day by a pastor I know.⁸ Wrestling with the whole tough issue of what love looks like when reconciliation of the relationship is not possible, this pastor revisited that scene between Jacob and his uncle Laban at Mizpah where those immortal words, “May the Lord watch between me and thee, while we are absent one from the other” are spoken.

The pastor readily acknowledged that these words are spoken between two people who have little love for one another, and even less trust. By this juncture in the story Laban had tricked Jacob into working for him fourteen long years to marry the daughter originally promised after seven years of work. And Jacob is now getting his revenge by fleeing Laban’s house—taking with him both of Laban’s beloved daughters, and all the grandchildren. The covenant is, in part, a plea to God on behalf of each man, to keep the other straight.

But this pastor also noted that even at their point of greatest enmity, these two parted company not with curses, but with a prayer that God would go with them both. While forgiveness and reconciliation was impossible for Jacob and Laban, each sent the other off in the hands of a God who not only judges and remembers evil, but who alone is just.

I suspect, that in some cases in our own lives, love that does not forsake justice will require us to “shake the dust off our feet” and to move on from relationships where a *turning* from evil and toward good does not seem possible, while still praying for the other and lifting the other up before God as we go.

In his own book on forgiveness, David Augsburger draws a helpful differentiation between unilateral forgiveness (in which we come to that point personally in which we are able, by the power of the Spirit, to release some of our unholy rage and to see the other once more as a child of God) and mutual forgiveness (in which a relationship with

the other is restored and reconstructed). Augsburg says that while the former, grounded in unconditional love, is always required of the Christian, the latter is not. "There may be no demands for seeing the other as worthy and precious," he writes, "but many demands for trusting, risking, and joining in relationship—no demands for loving; many demands for living." Otherwise the grace offered is cheap indeed.⁹

The second and more public model for what forgiveness looks like in a broken world comes to us from the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa. As I'm sure you know, these commissions were formed by the South African government to deal with the heinous crimes committed during the rule of Apartheid in South Africa, and have been supported by many Christian leaders—including Bishop Desmond Tutu. In accord with the gospel's radical commands, the commissions hold out the promise of forgiveness, of amnesty for some who come before them. But the grace is not cheap. In order to be forgiven, the perpetrators of crimes must, in the very locale where their crime was committed, tell the whole truth about that crime, confess their own sinful participation in it, and evidence a genuine turning of heart and life. In each instance, a tribunal of peers determines whether the truth has been told, and whether amnesty is warranted.

While I know these commissions have had their detractors, I do believe they are onto something rather profound theologically. Love at its heart requires not only a forgiving, but a remembering—and an honest naming of the evil that offends God. Repentance at its heart requires not only confession, but a *turning* of life that signals a new relationship is now possible.

Finally, I return full circle at this sermon's end to where I began—to the writings of Martin Luther King himself. I confess that when I went to that volume of King's sermons two years ago, I did so hoping that King would let me off of the love hook. Surely this man, who knew what it was like to have real enemies and real anger over real evils would qualify this radical love of Jesus in some way. But King never did.

Rather I found in King one whose radical strength of love also went hand in hand with a radical resistance of the evil he abhorred, and who, like his Lord, died witnessing to both.

"But I say to You, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you...Be merciful, Just as your Father is merciful." May our merciful God give to each of us strength, wisdom and power so to love, and so to live.

Notes

¹ David W. Augsburger, *Helping People Forgive* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 21.

² Augsburger, 21.

³ Hinkle as quoted in Augsburger, *Helping People Forgive*, 22.

⁴ Dr. James Cone gave this lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey, on April 15, 1999.

⁵ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 128.

⁶ Lamott, 137.

⁷ Miroslav Volf, "Difficult, Very Difficult," *Christian Century* (Jan. 27, 1999), 89.

⁸ The Rev. Art Ross, pastor of the White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, preached this sermon entitled "The Highest Form of Love" at the church on February 14, 1999. The scripture passages were 1. Corinthians 13:1-3, Luke 10: 1 - 11 and Romans 12:18.

⁹ Augsburger, *Helping People Forgive*, 16.