

astronomically high debts by God, we are incredibly ungracious to those who owe us.

Jesus is not only the one who urges forgiveness. Jesus is the one who embodies forgiveness. Jesus forgives.

Sometimes Jesus tells us parables in order to say something to us. Yet at other times Jesus tells us parables in order to *do* something to us, to entrap us in our own deceit, to hold the harsh mirror of truth up to our faces, to give us the grace just for one moment to see ourselves as God sees us. I believe this parable of the Unforgiving Servant or of the Forgiving and Then Unforgiving King lures us into the story and then uses the story to reveal to us our own caughtness in the web of vengeance and retribution and therefore our need for salvation.

A Response to “Our Kind of Crowd”

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I have been very glad to read and ponder Dr. Willimon’s engaging and demanding sermon, “Our Kind of Crowd.” I found myself led in new directions as he helped me see again the wrenching contradiction at the heart of the parabolic text and as he assembled real-life parallels to it that plunge us all into the world of vengeance and forgiveness.

My first response is that Willimon is surely on target as he draws us in to the contradictions that we always find when we go to the problem of forgiveness. I suppose that the contradiction that he finds both in the text and in our many examples is because we are invariably double-minded ourselves about the matter. We know very well out of our Christian nurture as well as out of our practice of civil decency that forgiveness is a proper and healthy thing to undertake. But we find ourselves in the midst of that knowledge in the thick of feelings and inclinations and passions that are not so easily managed or administered and therefore it is surely true that the “good we would do we do not do.” I found his way of articulating the matter compelling and confronting for me.

The second comment I wish to make is about the craftsmanship of the sermon. It ill behooves me to critique the craftsmanship of a sermon by one of the United States’ “best ten,” but Will would want me to do that and will understand that a part of my critique is passed along to him as a practice of envy. For my tastes, the sermon would have been stronger if it stayed closer to the story line of the text and teased that out in much greater detail. As he does it, he almost assumes that we know the detail and nuance of the story because he only alludes to it in passing. I believe that the allusions are not thick enough for most of us to grasp and to make the connections. Thus I believe that he leaves the text too often, too soon to leap to other real-life linkages.

The second reservation I have is about the introduction to the sermon with reference to Rodney King and Reginald Denny. In principle, I think I am increasingly opposed to sermon introductions because they characteristically lead away from the text. What I found with this sermon introduction, albeit brief, is that it led away from the text and stacked the cards so that I was heavily tilted in one particular direction in hearing the sermon. I do not think that the preacher needed to stack the cards but could

let me as a listener to the sermon be addressed directly to the text. What the sermon introduction did was to close off some avenues of pondering in imagination that I think I probably would have undertaken, but I kept waiting for the King-Denny thing to be laid out. Thus the sermon introduction did some things for me that I would have done better to do for myself. On the one hand, it made an important connection, but on the other hand, it precluded by its veto power other connections that might have been more important to me.

In the same way, I believe that Willimon's rich capacity to make reference to real-life situations loaded up the sermon with too many cases in point which illuminated and connected but which also detracted from the sermon.

It may well be that Willimon and I simply differ on how much the sermon ought to be tracked through the text and how much it ought to depart in order to make connections. I freely recognize that we do not all need do it the same way. I believe for myself that the text is the place where we must linger so that we grasp the narrative detail of the text. That particular way of proceeding also permits and requires the listener to make connections that are not made for him or her.

Conclusion. While I think the crafting of the sermon might be a point at which Willimon and I would have an ongoing conversation, I have no doubt that the sheer force of the proclamation puts at the margin any discussion we might have about the crafting of the sermon. The actual force of the sermon leads to a deep gospel question that carries any crafting that might have been done. I believe that the sermon shows how the truth of the gospel impinges upon the great questions of the day that arise in the dailiness of our being faithful. And so my word about Willimon's sermon is in the end not at all one of critique, but one of gratitude. I am left with a lot of things about which to think.

Willimon's Response to Brueggemann's Response

Looking back on how I came to preach "Our Kind of Crowd," I realize how deeply I was affected by a first reading of the text. Upon first meeting Matthew 19:23-34 (and I am becoming increasingly aware of the importance of first encounters with a biblical text), I was overcome by the sheer violence of it all. After a short-lived outburst of forgiveness (Matt. 27), it's mostly a story of retribution. By the end of the parable, everyone has beaten up on everyone else, all ending a great crescendo of violence in which the debtor is handed over to the torturer "until he would pay his entire debt" (v. 34) which, considering the absurd size of the debt, means forever. Even more so, we are warned, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." In other words, there's hell for all of us to pay.

It's a story about what happens among unforgiving servants, which means us. What happens is violence. There's hell to pay up at the palace and there's hell to pay down in the ghetto. I was determined not to lose that shock of the pervasive violence among us in my hours of subsequent handling of this text.

Therefore, while I agree with Walt that "the sermon would have been stronger if it stayed closer to the story line of the text and teased that out in much greater detail,"