

“Forgiveness: Going Against the Grain”

The Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 20, 2009

Isaiah 55:1-2, 6-9
Luke 6:27-36

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

“Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly.”
Henri J. M. Nouwen

Bombshells! A series of bombshells! That is how William Barclay describes Jesus' words to his followers that we know as the Sermon on the Mount. Bombshells!

Bombshells, hot potatoes, difficult sayings – by whatever name we struggle mightily with these words of our Lord recorded by both Luke and Matthew. If we do not find these words hard on the ears, it may well be that we have spiritualized them to such an extent that they do not rock our world when we hear them. They are unlike any of the laws of behavior that a philosopher or sage might lay down.

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, it quite literally “goes against the grain,” for we are brought up fearing our enemies, and in these recent years, since international terrorism visited our country eight years ago, it is not love we feel, but fear, and for many outright hatred.

I was reminded how deeply that grain is set last month when I picked up the newspaper four weeks ago (August 21) and read:

EDINBURGH/TRIPOLI (Reuters) - A former Libyan agent jailed for life for the 1988 Lockerbie bombing arrived home on Thursday after Scottish authorities released him on compassionate grounds because he is dying of cancer. Abdel Basset al-Megrahi, believed to have less than three months to live, was released on the order of Scotland's justice minister. “He is a dying man, he is terminally ill,” Scottish Justice Minister Kenny MacAskill told reporters in explanation. “My decision is that he returns home to die.”

What was your immediate reaction to hearing that news? Can you recall it? I sure can. My first reaction was *“What an amazing act of compassion and mercy!”* Within a day, however, a second reaction set in: dismay. I wasn't at all prepared for the angry demonstrations that flooded the airways and print media that besieged the Scottish administration, and threatened to topple the British Prime Minister. Since then many conflicting stories have raised the possibility that Scottish

compassion might not have been pure; that al-Megrahi's release was part of a quid pro quo arrangement with Libya.

II.

Though we may never know the truth, one thing is clear to me – there is a deep chasm between what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Plain and our human need to exact justice. Living the life of Christ is at the heart of Christian faith, yet living that life is not easy. The martyred Jesuit priest **Juan Ramón Moreno**, illuminated the Christian dilemma when he said, *“The initial response the proclamation of the reign [of God] ...is one of joy and happiness. Later, there will be a call to live up to the values of the coming reign.”*

“Love your enemies,” Jesus says, *“do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.”*

We love to hear these words. New Testament scholars point to these specific words of Jesus as the core of core teaching – the heart of his message and his ethic. Yet they are among the most problematic. Why?

The answer must surely be that if loving your enemies (in whatever way you define loving) was easy then everyone would be able to do it and the realm of God we call the Kingdom of Heaven would be in our midst this very moment. If doing good to those who hate you was easy, there would be no wars, and the thirst for retribution would be slaked in the bounteous waters of the peaceable kingdom. If it is easy to pray for the abuser, or to offer the one who strikes you another opportunity to do it again, or to say the one who steals from you, “and what else can I give you?” ... would that it be that easy but it is not.

Jesus words fly in the face of our natural response to threat, fear, attack and abuse; they simply cut across the grain of the ways we normally respond. Yet that is exactly what Jesus asks of his followers.

When I first started working with wood as a grade-schooler I quickly learned that it grows in such a way that it is easier to cut in one direction than the other, yet there are times when that is exactly what a woodworker is required to do. We've taken that terminology into everyday life – such as *“Why can't you just do it the way everyone else does? Why do you always have to go against the grain?”* or *“You can't always follow other people in life. Sometimes you need to go against the grain to do the right thing.”* To go against the grain is to do things in a way that is different from what is normal and accepted. One of the earliest things we tell our children is, *“Just because Billy or Tiffany does it doesn't mean it's right for you.”*

Living the life of Christ today – two thousand years after Jesus trod the dusty roads of Palestine – requires times when we simply have to go against the grain.

III

At the time Bud Welch owned and operated the Texaco service station on the outskirts of Shawnee, Oklahoma. He bought it in 1972, the year that his daughter Julie Marie was born.

Bud grew in Shawnee, in a family of eight children. He went to the local Catholic school, where the Sisters of Mercy taught him. Bud Welch and Lena Compassi met, married and were later divorced - when Julie was seven. She was their only child. After graduating from Marquette University with a Spanish degree Julie found her first job as a translator and claims representative with the Social Security Administration in her hometown – a situation that pleased both of her parents and a particular young lieutenant from nearby Tinker Air Force Base.

Julie drove a red Pontiac Grand Am and she often prayed the rosary in traffic on her way to work. What most folks didn't know was that Julie suffered from occasional depression. Her mom used to ask God to give Julie a good day and give the bad one to her instead.

On Wednesday morning April 19, 1995 Julie got up and dressed and drove to St. Charles Borromeo parish for 7 o'clock Mass and then drove downtown to the Social Security Office in the building at the corner of Fifth & Harvey. She liked to park her car near an elm tree that shaded a large portion of the employee parking lot. At noon she was going to have lunch with her dad at the Greek restaurant across the street.

At 9 a.m., shortly after beginning her first appointment of the day, a 5,000 homemade fertilizer bomb hidden in a truck exploded outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City killing Julie Marie Welch and 167 other men, women & children in a mass of twisted steel, collapsed concrete and shattered glass – the image of which has etched itself into the American psyche.

Bud Welch fell apart. For a year he smoked three packs of cigarettes a day (twice his normal). He'd come home after work and drink himself to sleep. "I'd fix a drink 10 minutes after getting home from the gas station. I was sick at heart," he says. "I went down to that shattered tree every day and looked at that through the fence at the wreckage and later the emptiness. I felt a special closeness down there, because that's where Julie as was last alive and we were supposed to have lunch. I finally said to myself: Bud you are sick. What does Bud Welch need to get better, to move forward?"

What Bud Welch did to get better was to forgive Timothy McVeigh.

“It took me three weeks of asking myself ‘Do we need trials to begin? Do we need an execution?’ I finally realized it was an act of vengeance and rage if we killed Timothy McVeigh or Terry Nichols. ‘Cause that’s why Julie and 167 other people were dead – because of vengeance and the rage [of those two]. It has to stop somewhere.”

IV

Methodist minister Lewis Smedes in a book dealing with this difficult business of forgiveness asks,

“Can the victim of monsters really forgive them? The answer is not blowing in the winds for everyone to hear. For clearly not everyone can hear it. It can only come straight from the heart of the person who, for some hellish moments or years, [has been] brutalized by a monster. The answer cannot come from anyone who is not a survivor of the evil that monsters have done. It can come only from those who have seen the monsters with their own eyes and felt the monsters’ evil in their own lives.

“Perhaps the answer cannot come from the mind. Perhaps it comes only from a pain-wracked heart. And, finally, from the heart possessed by hope.”

Smedes goes on to say . . .

“If forgiving is a remedy for the wounds of painful past, we cannot deny any human being the possibility of being forgiven lest we deny the victim the possibility of being healed through forgiving.

“Love makes forgiving a creative violation of all the rules [of] keeping score.”

God moves us to talk about things, and think about things that we ordinarily find very hard to talk about at all. That’s why Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth. And truth be known I’m still not sure that I have forgiven the man whose tractor-trailer smashed into line of stalled traffic on I-75 outside of Valdosta, Georgia in 1995 killing my dad and step mother in a fiery conflagration.

Presbyterian Marjorie Thompson, writer of *Soul Feast* and books on spirituality, says that “forgiveness is a gift we give one another, that opens the way to letting go of the bonds that literally tie us up in knots.” John begins his gospel by saying “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.” And the truth is that Christ came to give us a way out of the impenetrable morass of sin. **If we refuse to forgive then we prevent God’s forgiveness from entering our lives fully.**

If we desire to receive the gift of God’s forgiveness -- we must be willing to forgive others – yes even the monsters! Eugene Peterson brings Jesus’ words into the modern vernacular this way:

“Here’s an old saying that deserves a second look: Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Is that going to get us anywhere? Here’s what I propose: “Don’t hit back at all. If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues you for the shirt off your back, gift wrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.”

“In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.” (Peterson, p 23]

V

Justice is one thing. Forgiveness is quite another. Justice has to do with recompense. Forgiveness has to do with grace. So how do we begin to forgive the monsters who took down the Murrah Building and the lives that were lost that day? How do we forgive their kin who flew those planes into the World Trade Towers or took down Pan Am 103?

We might try doing what our Catholic brother Bud Welch offered to a woman whose daughter was also killed in the Oklahoma City bombing. At a meeting of the families of survivors she said, very quietly, “Bud, I want to be where you are. How did you get there?”

“At first,” he said, “I didn’t know what to tell her. Then I said, ‘Here’s what I think is going on with you.’” And Bud held up a tightened fist. “Look in there, where your fingers are squeezed into your palm. You see that little space in there, inside your fist? See? You’re holding on to it. Vengeance is in there. I understand. You’re holding on to it because you feel like you’re honoring your daughter’s life. But here’s what I think: I think you can honor her better by letting go of the hate and rage. Loosen it up just a little at a time. If you feel like you’re losing too much of it, then tighten it up again. Then loosen it later, see if that revenge is slipping out. Physically try it.”

Several months later, Bud was on his way back home from a death row vigil in Arizona when his cell phone rang. The connection was bad, but it was the woman with the clenched fist, calling from Oklahoma City. He had to call her back three times just to hear her through the static. “Bud,” she said, “I’ve been trying to do what you said with the fist ... I’ve been trying, and I think it’s beginning to work.”

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