

Really, Jesus?

February 24, 2019

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, and forgive them as you have been forgiven.”

Really, Jesus? You mean those who have been ripped off, violated, raped, mugged, misjudged, oppressed, victimized, or lost loved ones through the violent acts of others are to love them, bless them, forgive them? Not easy to do, Jesus. Are you serious?

Every week in worship we pray, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” or “forgive us our trespasses,” or “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us,” as we pray the Lord’s Prayer. And intellectually, we know that this is what we should do, but our hearts are not always there. There is too much emotion around being hurt by others, even sometimes, our loved ones or people close to us.

So our natural tendency is to seek revenge, or punishment, to lash back. Fight or flight, is a part of our DNA. So, 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.

Just recently Liam Neeson told how he wanted to lash out because a friend had been brutally raped. Unfortunately, the response to his story got muddied up around the issue of racism. What got lost was the comment about the deep, raw, visceral rage that he felt and his desire to lash out. It is the emotional reaction we all feel in varying degrees depending on the hurt that we have experienced.

The prevailing culture in our nation is one of revenge. We are a nation full of angry people with short fuses ready to react, and hate groups have grown in number. And social media hasn’t helped us. And bumper stickers read, “I don’t get mad I get even.” So forgiveness and grace are in very short supply indeed.

And then we hear these words of Jesus, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that? If you return good when good is done you, who doesn’t? So what I am proposing is resisting evil without using evil and breaking that endless cycle of revenge. I have a new game plan, and a new set of rules, for in God’s kingdom, love and forgiveness are the rules.”

Well, that’s tough to do, Jesus.

One day a person high on drugs entered a neighborhood grocery store and shot to death the young man who was working behind the counter. A television reporter interviewing his mother a day or so later asked, “What would you like to see done to the gunman who killed your son? What do you think would be justice in this case?” “Justice?” the mother asked. “Justice is ultimately up to my Lord. Although my heart wants revenge on the

man who did this, I know that it is up to God. I just pray that someday God will give me the courage to forgive.”

The courage to forgive – that’s what it would take, wouldn’t it? Some derive grace to go against our natural inclinations, our innate desire for retribution and to play by the rules of another game, rules that God’s expansive love makes possible. That mother, even in her grief, had somehow known the rules of another game: God’s game. That was inculcated deep in her.

What is forgiveness? Well, it might be helpful to say something about what it is not. Forgiveness does not mean denying our hurt, pain, anger, or deep anguish. There is no need for forgiveness if one has not been wronged or betrayed in some way. So, forgiveness is only possible when we acknowledge the negative impact of a person’s actions on our lives and we own the pain.

Forgiveness does not mean one submits to martyrdom. It is not participating in our own victimization. There are too many people, especially women, who remain in abusive relationships and take on the blame of another’s actions and the too easily said, “I forgive you” is shallow and meaningless when it allows abusive behaviors to continue. To forgive is not to excuse unjust behavior. Destructive behaviors are destructive. They are evil. They’re not all right and ought not to be condoned or ignored.

To forgive is not necessarily to forget. Certainly small offenses we can forget and let go by. But some major assaults we may have to live with forever. Some things shouldn’t be forgotten lest we repeat them: the effects of racism, the ways we treated Native Americans, Africans and Asians in this country, and the Holocaust.

Forgiveness is not dependent on the other person’s contrition. It would be so much easier, wouldn’t it, if the offender was truly sorry and begged for forgiveness. But that’s not the way it always works.

And forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation is a further step and is the restoration of the relationship and requires mutuality which is not always possible. The story of Joseph and his brothers is a story of reconciliation.

What, then, is forgiveness? Forgiveness is to make a conscious choice, to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment. We leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution. It is an unbinding of ourselves from our anger and our vengefulness, and in the process we free ourselves. It is giving up our desire to control and turning it over to God. For only God knows what consequences are needed to restore a person’s life. Even in the midst of anger, and pain, and hurt, we still have a choice as to how we will respond.

Forgiveness can take a long time, for it is not an event but a process of healing and letting go, of working through the memories and living through the pain, of getting the poison out. Buechner said: “When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you’re spared

the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. It means the freedom again to be at peace inside your own skin.” Forgiveness can be hard work, and tough, and can take courage; and the thought of living it out may overwhelm us, but we can begin in our own primary relationships, in our church life, as we work in community, and as we use Facebook and Twitter, and we can learn to play by God’s rules.

So the question is this: Is this God’s world or not? Do we believe in God’s redemptive love or not, a love which we have all received over and over again? And if so, we will learn to play by God’s rules as hard as it is? If we have received the love of God, we are called and empowered to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven, to bless as we have been blessed. And as we practice forgiveness, and forgiveness is a faith practice, not only do we unbind ourselves, but we begin to change the culture of the world, to stop the endless cycle of retribution, to create a new narrative for how we live together.

Love your enemies. Bless them and forgive them. It is a call to be a powerful, world-changing, revolutionary people.

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