

Forgiveness - How Do We Get There?
2 Samuel 11;26-12:10, 13-15, Luke 7:36-50
Susan Flanders - June 17, 2007

The Anglican writer C.S. Lewis once said, "Forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive." Indeed! Forgiveness is a lovely idea - but, in practice, it is difficult, and subject to various conflicting interpretations of just how it ought to work.

This morning's stories, one from 2 Samuel and one from Luke are vivid tales of sin and forgiveness - quite different. In the first, King David is rightly convicted by the court prophet Nathan. This was not so much for his adultery with Bathsheba (a common liberty taken by kings in those days - unlike our own chaste political landscape!), but for the king's horrifying cover-up. David attempted to establish the husband, Uriah's paternity, but, failing that, he had him sent to the front lines to be killed in battle. Nathan, as God's spokesman, condemns David, and David confesses that indeed, he has sinned against God. Nathan responds that the Lord has put away his sin, but then, the story continues with God striking the child David has fathered, and killing it - seemingly as punishment. This confounds and outrages us - it is the clearest example in the Old Testament of intergenerational punishment - the sins of the fathers being visited on the children. How could a loving God do this? Accountability and punishment are on thing, by why the death of an innocent baby? Here, forgiveness comes with a very high price. It's not that we don't understand that our sins can cause the loss of innocent life - that's what our war in Iraq does daily, but we don't see this as God's punishment, we see it as a predictable consequence of our human actions. In this first story, forgiveness is given, but the accountability is severe - God seems cruel.

In the gospel story, forgiveness is free - no punishment. The sinful woman who crashes the dinner party shows her gratitude to Jesus by lavishing care on him - really an embarrassing display of tears and cascading hair and precious ointment. However, she is so much more loving than the self-righteous host with his minimal hospitality, that Jesus simply declares that her many sins were forgiven and points out her loving gratitude.

We see a tension between the two stories. Is forgiveness connected with repentance and punishment and can't really work without them? Or is forgiveness to be given with no strings attached? Kierkegaard says "the only true forgiveness is that offered and extended before the offender has apologized and sought it". Which is it? How is it with you, and what is your experience?

When we examine some of Jesus' other teachings, such as the one about forgiving 70 times 7, or the Lord's Prayer where God's forgiveness seems to be connected with our willingness to forgive others, we are given pause. Does Jesus mean that forgiveness must be an initiative, regardless of the response of the person who wounds us or causes harm? Is Christian forgiveness more than a transaction - more than you say you're sorry, you take steps to make amends, you shape up, and then I forgive you?

This latter is so often the way we operate, and because of our deep sense that there should be some justice when wrong is done, we have a really hard time with radically free forgiveness. It is love's toughest work; it goes against our nature. We have to want to forgive, and sometimes we can't even find it in ourselves to want to want to!

We need justice in our world. We need laws and punishments and accountability. We need standards and fairness in the way we treat employees and students and our children. All communities, all relationships need this. But, without forgiveness in addition to all this, justice can be cold; fairness can be debated endlessly; punishment can breed resentment. Without forgiveness, love cannot flourish, because we do hurt each other, we do betray and lie, we do create or allow for unfair systems. Look at the current morass of arguments about immigration law. What is fair? No solution will be judged fair to everyone. Who should be punished; who should be allowed to come in, to stay in? What should workers be paid; why should farmers be penalized - it goes on and on. Unless there is some forgiveness and healing around this issue, along with whatever imperfect law is finally passed, we will continue to be stuck in a bitter struggle that seems to have no solution.

But, for most of us, though we rightly think about social justice issues in terms of fairness and accountability and who gets hurt by whom, for most of us, forgiveness is a need that arises closer to home, more personally, when someone hurts us. We need forgiveness because we do hurt others, and they hurt us, even when we try very hard. The solution cannot be perfect behavior, perfect adherence to the rules, because none of us can do that. Forgiveness is love's answer to how we wrong each other. The other stuff - repentance, accountability, just punishment - should happen, but only through forgiveness can we maintain real bonds of love and trust and friendship. Forgiveness is a transformation of the way we look at someone who hurts us, a transformation that perhaps depends on grace, or at least on wanting to want to forgive.

Here is a pretty good fable about how that grace might work. It's called "The Magic Eyes" and it comes from a wonderful small book, written in 1984 by Lewis Smedes, called *Forgive and Forget*. The fable is about a baker named Fouke

and his wife Hilda who lived in a small village a long time ago. Fouke was cold and self-righteous, exuding judgment on all in the village – keeping people away, even his warm and tender-hearted wife. She loved and respected him but ached for some warmth from him, and so, one morning when the baker returned home from his pre-dawn bread-baking, he found a stranger in bed with Hilda. This was a huge scandal, and everyone expected him to quickly throw her out. Instead, he was so self-righteous that he announced his forgiveness because that's what the Bible said, and he kept her with him. But deep down, he hated her. He hated the shame she brought his home, especially since he had been such a good and faithful husband. His forgiveness was fake, really just a way of punishing her. However, this fake forgiveness did not sit well in heaven, and each time Fouke felt his secret hate for Hilda, an angel dropped a pebble in his heart. The pebbles hurt, and the pain made him hate all the more, and the pebbles multiplied, dragging him down, bending him over so far that he could barely look up. He wished he were dead!

Then the angel came and told him how he could be healed – that there was a remedy – the miracle of the magic eyes. Fouke would need to look back and see his wife as the weak and lonely person she was when she betrayed him. At first, he protested, saying that nothing could change the past – she was guilty and always would be. But the angel persisted, telling him that although the past could not be changed, the hurt that came from it could be healed – with the magic eyes.

So Fouke, in desperation, asked how he could get those eyes. Only ask, said the angel – you must truly want them, and they will be given, so that each time you see Hilda through these new eyes, one pebble will be lifted from your aching heart. So the baker asked, and the angel gave, sure enough, Hilda began to change in front of Fouke's wondering eyes. He began to see her as a needy woman who loved him instead of as a wicked woman who had betrayed him. It took a long time, but eventually, pebble by pebble, Fouke's heart grew light again, and he could straighten up and look ahead. He welcomed Hilda to come into his heart again, and she did, with gratitude and love, and so, the forgiveness that came through the magic eyes, healed them both.

It's just a fable, and perhaps it oversimplifies the complexities of forgiveness and the ambiguities of our hearts. But, because we cannot control others who hurt us, and because all the high standards we set for ourselves and one another will never turn us into perfect people, I think we might be glad of the gift of forgiveness. It is probably God's best gift of love, and I believe that if we ask for it, we will find it in our hearts. Amen.