

A generous forgiveness

Luke 6:31-38; Romans 2:1-11

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An old friend used to always remind me, “A word spoken is like toothpaste out of the tube. Once it’s out there, there’s no way to put it back.” With your forbearance, I’d still like to try.

I’ve been wanting to take back something I wrote into our liturgy a few weeks ago. It was during Lent. We’d read a Prayer of Confession and were proceeding into the Words of Assurance. The Assurance went something like this: “When we take full responsibility for our actions, we can lay our burden down. Then we can be forgiven...”

Psychologically speaking, that may be true. Perhaps we need to take responsibility for what we’ve done in order to be able to forgive ourselves (or be forgiven by others). But theologically speaking, I got it backwards: it’s the promise of God’s forgiveness that releases us, and forgiveness that makes repentance possible. It’s an important enough point to merit a bit of a sermonic retraction.

Something about the way I’d phrased that Assurance bothered me from the beginning, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. I knew I’d been influenced by recent events. I’d just come from a couple of interfaith forums with Muslims, Jews, and other Christians, and at each one there had been some brief discussion of forgiveness. At both gatherings, Jewish or Muslim friends had said that they thought Christianity lets people off the hook too easily, that in contrast Judaism and Islam emphasize reparation and repentance more than forgiveness—or at least those traditions give reparation and repentance temporal priority: you have to make amends before you can be forgiven. This may be one of the bigger differences between the religions, though as with all such things, it’s best not to make too polarized a statement about it. The way one Muslim put it was that God will not forgive me if you don’t; if I’ve done you wrong, it does no good for me to ask God for forgiveness if I haven’t asked you first. There’s a logic and an appropriateness there, and it may be a lot easier for me to turn to God, whom I expect to be loving and merciful, than it is for me to go back and face you, about whom I’m not so sure. Call it theological triangulation, or a trinity of avoidance. Some call it cheap grace.

Krista Tippett of NPR’s “Speaking of Faith” had Chuck Colson on her program a week or two ago. Colson, you may recall, spent time in jail for his role in Watergate and has since become known both for his prison ministry and as a spokesman for his blend of Christianity and Americanism. On the radio show he repeated the old bumper sticker phrase “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.” That’s a dangerous oversimplification, especially among those who conflate Christianity and nationalism. It’s also the flip side of my putting repentance before the possibility of forgiveness. Colson’s aphorism requires no repentance and bolsters the all-too-human tendency toward self-justification, and *self*-justification is just too easy. To use the language of that old-time religion that Colson should know so well, the point is to get right with God, not with yourself.

What a lot of this points to, I think, is a tendency shared by people across lines of ideology and religion, a tendency to make ourselves the final arbiters of things. We can get to that dangerous point as much from a skeptical or humanistic view as we can from religious arrogance. If you argue that there is no God or that we simply can’t know what God requires, then we you might say that

it's really up to us to decide what's right and wrong and what's ample grounds for forgiveness. Or if you think you understand God so very well that in effect God and you or your group are inseparable, then there's a dangerous assumption that your way and God's way are one, that you and your group are "the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

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The Muslim mystic Rumi wrote, "If you want your misery to vanish, then try to banish your worldly wisdom. This is because worldly wisdom belongs to the lower nature, which is not illuminated by God's light. The wisdom of the world makes you both more opinionated and more doubtful about your beliefs. But the wisdom of faith carries you beyond the heavens." (Masnavi 2)

In a world that has become so polarized, might a reassertion of theological humility be one of the bridges we need?

"Do not judge," Jesus says, "and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." There's a generosity of spirit here that's all too lacking in current discourse. And the promise that generosity multiplies itself generously.

Something in the echo chamber of my mind has been harkening back to those passages in the gospels lately where Jesus says certain things have been revealed to you, but they haven't been revealed to everyone else. Up to now, I'd always heard those sayings—for better and for worse—in kind of a Gnostic way: that you (the disciples), you (the followers of Jesus), you (Christians) are in on an esoteric truth, and not everyone has been chosen to be as enlightened as you are. (You might also note a tinge of the modern political liberal in that interpretation: if others only understood things as well as we do, they'd see the error of their ways. I confess to that tendency, too.) But I'm starting to reflect on those passages in a different way now, as one who doesn't always get it, as one who may not be in the in crowd. Maybe part of what's going on there is an urge to patience. Maybe it's not all as democratic and egalitarian as we want to assume. Maybe not all of us will ever understand it. Maybe we'll all never see things in the same way. Whether that's a sign of God's will or simply an empirical description of the way the world is is open to debate, but for whatever reason it does seem to be how things are. And that might encourage us less to zealous assertions of the truth as we see it and more to patience and humility in dealing with one another.

There are couple of lovely sayings in the Qur'an that seem to hint at this as well. One says that God made us all different so that we might get to know one another. Another says, "if God had wanted, God could have made you one people. But God decided to leave some in error, giving guidance as God pleases" (16:93). If God decides to leave some people in error, who are we to blame them? And can we always know that it's others and not we ourselves who are of the mark? Perhaps we too have been left in error on some things for the good of all. In such a case, wouldn't we also want others to treat us generously?

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned." Or as Paul warns, "you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same

things.” We so often project our less lovable qualities onto our opponents, and thereby show ourselves to be the very thing we deplore.

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The first Sunday of every month we come back to the practice of Holy Communion. It’s like a touchstone for us, a reminder of a key moment in our sacred history when forgiveness, fellowship, and faithfulness trumped resentment and anger. Jesus gathered at table with his closest friends, and even they had a variety of convictions about what the truth was and the right thing to do. He could see how this was going to play out, but he banished no one. They all shared the broken bread, and even more touching, they all shared the cup of the covenant one last time. In the most immediate of ways, the covenant has already been broken. Jesus has already been betrayed, and he knows it. But all are welcome, because Christ’s mission from beginning to end is about relationship, not rejection. He comes not to judge and condemn, but to redeem and reconcile.

This is a life of forgiveness, and an example that may inspire us to generosity of heart. From that may flow a repentance for our own deeds and a patience with others for theirs.