

Sept 10 2023

Pr. Steve

Texts: 'A Letter from St. Paul to American Christians'-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.;
Romans 13: 8-12; Matthew 18: 15-20

In the name of God, Abba Imma, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Owe no one anything, except the debt of mutual love." [Romans 13: 8-10at] That's it. Love fulfills the Law. (We're so desperate to teach people the Ten Commandments, aren't we?) Love fulfills the Law: *'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* Nothing higher, nothing better, nothing more aspirational.

In ancient Israel, when someone was accused of murder, there had to be two witnesses. One was insufficient; there had to be two. And if the accused was found guilty and condemned to death by stoning, those two witnesses were the first to cast the first stones. Take that to heart. Going to follow through on the accusation?

We live in a society filled with deceit and accusations flung everywhere. *'Will you cast the first stone?'* Jesus asks us, *'All of you who are innocent—feel free to cast the first stone.'* Ready?

So, in the Gospel today [Matt. 18: 15-20], Jesus shares the procedure for caring for someone who's gone outside the community. One on one, maybe more--if it requires a couple more, OK, a few more, fine--but the emphasis is on the inclusion, to bring the brother or sister back into the community. However, this very passage got turned on its head for centuries, and what did the Church primarily use it for? *'Who shall we excommunicate? What are the rules? How do we get rid of..?'* Because that part we're really good at. It's just that it's a total violation of the Gospel and this teaching today.

And more, Dr. King, in the early stages of his theological study, found himself deeply troubled that this passage only applies to interpersonal relations. He said, *'Forgiveness has to be so much bigger, because if it's only between two people, well, that is condemning those in the slums and ghettos to hell: "We have no responsibility for you. We certainly haven't hurt you." It takes the marginalized and strangles them. Dr. King said, 'Christ's reconciliation is so much bigger.'*

All tyrannies emphasize the irreversibility of evil. All tyrannies throughout history have said that evil is irreversible. Hitler said that he believed in the unforgivableness of sin. Hitler! *'Sin is unforgivable. We are the righteous. We know what we're doing here. Those who don't cooperate with us, don't qualify. They don't matter; they shall be dismissed. All uncertainties are to be eliminated. No mercy for Jews, for the weak, for the failures, for the outcasts. None, because we're righteous.'* Can I get an Amen? (He got an Amen, didn't he? Millions of people.)

It happens to be the same today. The righteous know what they're doing.

'We shall not put up with weakness or failure. Sin is unforgivable.'
It's how power faces itself. *'We're righteous.'*

Only our acknowledgment of our own defects and fallibility allows us to forgive others. However, as a great theologian of the previous generation [George Hoyer] said, "Most American Christians only consider themselves 'honorary sinners.'" *'Yes, it's true—I'm one of those. No applause...'*
Honorary sinners...

[A belief in the irreversibility of evil implies a refusal to accept the precariousness of life and the risk that all finite good lives within. Indeed, the good that people do is always in the realm of the uncertain and the fluid, because the needs and of people, the sins and failures of people, are constant. Love triumphs, at least in this life, not by eliminating evil once and for all but by resisting and overcoming evil anew every day. Merton]

Thomas Merton wrote,
A belief in the irreversibility of evil implies a refusal to accept the precariousness and the risk of life because we are finite creatures. Indeed, the good that people do is always in the realm of the uncertain and the fluid, because the needs and sufferings of people, the sins and failures of people, are constant. And love triumphs, at least in this life, not by eliminating evil once and for all, but by resisting and overcoming evil anew every day, day by day.

Forgiveness and mercy require constant mutual release. Constant mutual release. Constant mutual release. It is hard work. Now you know why most of the time we opt for being righteous—it's easier. *"I have all the answers; I don't need you."* It's so much easier.

Instead, *'When your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat. If she's thirsty, give her something to drink. In this way, you will heap coals upon their heads'*--meaning you might enkindle the fire of love within them. You might. You might. Because the only thing that overcomes our enemies is helping them become other than enemies. At the end of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln said, *'Do I not destroy my enemies by making them my friends?'* And Gandhi said, *'If I don't believe in the humanity of my enemies, how can they believe in their own humanity?'*

'Forgive us our sins, forgive us our wrongs, as we... [gesturing for congregation to complete] *as we forgive those who sin against us.'* It does go on, doesn't it? The truth--when we know who we are, as fallible people with foibles--that's what allows us to forgive others. And this is the healing mystery of the work of Christ. Christ's life and love, work and wisdom is dying xxx. (11:05)

You know, I've never had anybody come up to me and say, *"I'm just dying to forgive you."* (Of course, I've never done it either.) Dying gives new life so that a resurrecting reconciliation can infuse our hearts, and lives, and this world, who so desperately needs it.

"Owe no one anything, except the debt of mutual love." Why not become an oasis of peace? Wow, doesn't that sound great! Just be that center, an oasis of peace. Cultivate that within our hearts and minds. Now it would help if we were all Hawaiian, like Kaleo. These are peaceful people, aren't they? Oh, wouldn't that be nice to be an oasis of peace? But we aren't Hawaiian, most of us.

What turns our hearts towards God? Because forgiveness, friends, restores not by putting things back the way they were. That can never happen; they've been broken. It's not making it the way it was. Forgiveness restores by creating an opening to make things the way they can be, they could be, and should be. It's uncertain, it's fluid, it's open, it's a dance, it's an oasis of peace in the midst of crazy times and situations--and our own relatives. Still an oasis of peace. Because we only blossom in the presence of those who believe in us.

Who has made you blossom? Are they an oasis of peace? Absolutely they are. Absolutely, anyone who's made you blossom has been an oasis.

A story from Bp. Tutu in his book, No Future Without Forgiveness. (This is from the Truth and Reconciliation experience [in South Africa].)

The Commission held two hearings on the Bisho Massacre in which 30 people had been killed. The hall was packed to the rafters with those who had either been injured in the incident or had lost loved ones, as well as those who had participated in the doings of this day. The tension in the room was palpable. One of the first witnesses was the former head of the CDF (Ciskei Defense Forces), Major General Marius Oelschig, who incensed the audience not so much by what he said as by how he said it.

The next witnesses were former CDF officers, one white and others black. The white officer, Colonel Horst Schobesberger, was their spokesperson. He said it was true that they had given the orders for the soldiers to open fire on the crowd. The tension became so thick you could (as they say) cut it with a knife. The audience could not have been more hostile. Then he turned toward the audience and made an extraordinary appeal:

"I say we are sorry. I say the burden of the Bisho Massacre will be on our shoulders for the rest of our lives. We cannot wish it away. It happened. But please, I ask specifically the victims not to forget—I cannot ask this—but to forgive us, to get the soldiers back into the community, to accept them fully, to try to understand also the pressure they were under then. This is all I can do. I'm sorry, this I can say, I'm sorry."

That crowd, which had been close to lynching them, did something quite unexpected. It broke out into thunderous applause! Unbelievable! The mood change was startling. The colonel's colleagues joined him in apologizing and when the applause finally died down, I said:

"Can we keep just a moment's silence, please, because we are dealing with things that are very, very deep. It isn't easy, as we all know, to ask for forgiveness and it's also not easy to forgive, but we are people who know that when someone cannot be forgiven there is no future."

Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

