

May 18, 2014

TEXT: Acts 7:54-60

TITLE: The Craft of Forgiveness

In Acts 2 we have the first recorded sermon of Peter. He spoke about Jewish history and how God's Son, Jesus Christ, was rejected, crucified and resurrected – and on that day thousands believed the gospel. In Acts 6 & 7 we have the first recorded sermon of Stephen. He spoke about Jewish history and how God's Son, Jesus Christ, was rejected, crucified and raised to glory – and on that day an angry mob rejected Stephen's words and stoned him to death. Preachers love the first example while the second example makes us uneasy. Stephen's martyrdom reminds us that the gospel of Christ is not always received with joy – and that although we are Easter people, rejoicing in the good news of Christ's resurrection, violence still mars life on earth.

If I were to do this bible story justice, I'd read Stephen's entire sermon to you. We would hear once more the story of God's covenant with Israel, about Abraham, Jacob and Joseph, Moses and Mount Sinai. Stephen insisted that the same hardness of heart that caused people to question Moses and disobey God led the Jerusalem crowds to reject and crucify Jesus; and as soon as Stephen said that, a swirl of violent emotions was unleashed. The mob became enraged, ground their teeth, covered their ears, and picked up stones. But at that moment, Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit; he had a vision of Jesus as the Son of God, and as he was being stoned to death, he asked Christ to forgive them for their sins.

There is a lot of emotional distance between the blood-thirsty mob and the dying martyr asking Christ not to hold this sin against them. And I could piously tell you to be like Stephen – keep your eyes on Jesus and forgive your enemies. But you and I know that forgiveness is not a light switch you simply turn on and off at will. Forgiveness is hard and costly, but it is something that is critically important in our life and faith. So we need to examine it carefully and examine it together.

You have probably noticed that when we read a psalm in church we often read only selected verses from them. Many psalms start out nice and satisfying: *Psalm 139 – O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; such knowledge is too wonderful for me.* But near the end of the psalm the tone shifts: *O that you would kill the wicked, O God, that the bloodthirsty would depart from me. Do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.* These angry sentiments are quite common in the psalms and elsewhere in the bible, but we tend to sanitize scripture readings for church to avoid these ugly emotions. But those words remind us of an important truth: We do have enemies. And we do get angry.

So here's an important question: When you are angry, what can you do with those emotions? 1) You can try to bury them inside you, where they fester and wound from within. 2) You can lash out at the person you're angry with, likely making things worse instead of better. Or 3) you can bring them to God – you can shout and rage and angrily pray to God. Of the three choices, that last option makes the most sense. Look, do you think that God doesn't know what you're feeling in your heart? Then why not be honest and tell these things to God? You might pray, "Lord, I'm angry about lots of things. I'm angry about little things, like getting stuck in traffic, like not being appreciated by my boss or spouse or friends. I'm also angry about unfair things, like being in chronic pain, like constantly being in debt, like needing more help with my kids or my aging parents. I'm angry about violence done against me and others – about being abused or raped, about the kidnapped Nigerian girls or the African American sons and daughters killed on our Pittsburgh streets. I'm angry about war and terrorism and global warming and unemployment, about feeling helpless and feeling afraid for the future. I'm angry, God!" Theologian Miroslav Volf reminds us that "rage belongs before God" – that's where our cries from the depths of our souls belong. Because in that moment we place both our wounded selves and our anger at enemies before a God who loves us and who does justice.¹ We place what is the worst in the world and worst in us before God, so that hate can withdraw just enough for a seed to be planted for the miracle of forgiveness.

We bring our anger and desire for vengeance to God. We set it down and step back from it a bit as we await the response of our God of justice. What does that response look like? If we are guided by some of the rules of the Old Testament, justice might be harsh and violent. In Genesis 4, after Cain killed his brother Abel, he was sent forth to wander the land – but he was protected so that anyone who harmed Cain would suffer seven times as much (Genesis 4:15). Then Cain's great-great-great-great-grandson Lamech boasted, if Cain was to be avenged sevenfold, anyone who strikes me I will avenge seventy-sevenfold (Genesis 4:24). Thus is born the language of extreme retribution – of Hiroshima nuclear bombs, fire-bombing Dresden, and Iraqi shock and awe. But it solves nothing.

Somewhat less vengeful is another Old Testament standard of justice found in the laws of the book of Deuteronomy: (Deut 19) *If on the evidence of two or three witnesses a charge is sustained, then show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.* This is the old law of retribution, of doling out justice so that the punishment supposedly fits the crime. This may sound good for political candidates who want to appear tough on crime but this approach also solves nothing. Life for a life does not bring back the first life. You can't undo a murder, a rape, a violent crime. As real as the desire for vengeance and retribution may be, it offers no lasting hope. Forgiveness is the only way out of the spiral of violence that plagues so much of human life.

During World War II, Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller opposed Adolf Hitler and was imprisoned in Dachau for almost 8 years. Niemöller described that there was

a small opening in the wall of his prison cell through which he could look out and see the gallows in the courtyard, knowing that he might be one of the next to be hanged. As he endured the weeks and months, he realized that he did not fear dying so much. He feared that when they put the noose around his neck he would say to his Nazi executioner, "There is a God in heaven, and he is going to get you." Niemöller continued, "If I had said that, how far my death would have been from [that of] the one I call Lord. If Jesus Christ had died that way, there would be no preaching of the cross, no forgiveness, no reconciliation from God's side. It has been the greatest lesson of my life to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. God is not even the enemy of His own enemies."²

When confronted by violence, the range of options moves from extreme vengeance (sevenfold response) to balanced retribution (eye for an eye) to the extreme forgiveness of Jesus and the martyr Stephen (Lord, do not hold this sin against them.) Yet remember how the Psalms encourage us to bring our rage and anger before the Lord – the one who knows our hearts and who is God of both the abuser and the abused. And remember that once we lay before the Lord our desire for revenge, like Niemöller did in the concentration camp, we have created a space for healing to occur, for a seed to be planted that leads to the miracle of forgiveness.

Miroslav Volf knew about this space for forgiveness. He wrote from his own experience as a Yugoslav Christian who saw his homeland torn apart by ugly, modern warfare in the 1990s between Christians, Orthodox, Catholics, and Muslims; Serbs and Croats and Bosnians who murdered and raped and shredded their nation into tattered remnants. He said that forgiveness breaks down the walls of hostility long enough to create an empty space of neutrality. When the violence stops, people can choose to go their separate ways if they wish. They can say "I'm sorry. Too much suffering has happened for us ever to be friends again; too much blood was shed for us ever to live together." So they draw a line in the empty space that separates the "them" from the "us." This is one solution that contains a small kernel of forgiveness, but it is not true peace.

Peace comes when we learn the craft of forgiveness. To do a craft well, whether that is playing the piano or painting a watercolor, you have to know your materials and practice and persevere. It is something you don't get right the first time, but it is something that you can improve upon and occasionally do quite well. In the craft of forgiveness, the fullest expression of it was Jesus' prayer from the cross, when he prayed "Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing." A similar expression of that came from Stephen, who lifted his face off the angry mob, called to mind the example of Christ and in that re-directed gaze moved beyond his own suffering to say, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

When we choose to step back from vengeance and violence, when we lay down our anger before God and step back from it just a bit, a space is made for healing. There in that space we practice the craft of forgiveness. We may do it

imperfectly when we simply walk away from those who've wounded us, breaking off contact with "them." But sometimes, by grace, we do the craft well. We forgive well. We step into that space that holds both God and our enemy, and we learn how to embrace again. We remember the example of Christ and of Stephen – and we lift our gaze heavenward and in that moment truly pray, "Lord, forgive them as you have forgiven me and all the world so often." In that moment of grace and forgiveness, we discover real "peace." It's not easy, but then all things that have real value in life take some work to master. All great crafts, even the craft of forgiveness, take effort to learn. But by remembering Christ and trusting in Christ, all things are possible.

AMEN

¹ Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 1996, p. 124.

² Quoted Charles M. Riddle III, *Christian Ministry*, May/June 1997, p. 33.