

THE FORGIVEN FORGIVER

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Texts: Psalm 25:1-7, 16-18 and Matthew 18:21-35

In her book *The Mighty and the Almighty*, Madeleine Albright shares a story told by Bob Seiple who served in the State Department as the first American ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom. The story is about a young Lebanese woman named Mary. In the 1980s Lebanon was in the midst of a brutal civil war. Mary lived in a mostly Christian village, and when a Muslim militia invaded, everyone fled for their lives, including Mary. As she was running away she tripped over a root and fell; before she could scramble to her feet, a young militiaman pressed the barrel of a pistol into the side of her head and demanded, “Renounce the cross or die.” “I was born a Christian, and I will die a Christian,” Mary replied. So, the young man shot her, sending a bullet through her neck and spine. As she lay on the ground unable to move he carved a cross on her chest with his bayonet and then left her there to die.

The next day the militia returned to occupy the village and found Mary, still alive but paralyzed. Militiamen created a stretcher out of wood and cloth and carried her to a hospital. She survived. In speaking with Mary about those events, Seiple asked:

“Here you are, an Arab woman... strapped to a wheelchair, held hostage for the rest of your life. How do you feel about the guy who pulled the trigger?”

She replied, “I have forgiven him.”

“How in the world could you forgive him?” Seiple asked.

“Well,” Mary replied, “I forgave him because my God forgave me. It’s as simple as that.”ⁱ

Is it really that simple? God forgives us, so we forgive others for the sins they have committed against us – regardless of the sin or whether the sinner even asks forgiveness. Is it as simple as that for you as it was for Mary, or are there sins that you have not yet been able to forgive, sinners for whom you still hold anger or hate or a grudge in your heart? I daresay there are times when we feel as Abraham Lincoln did when he wrote:

I felt a good deal like the sick man in Illinois who was told he probably hadn't many days longer to live, and he ought to make his peace with any enemies he might have. He said the man he hated worst of all was a fellow named Brown, in the next village.... So Brown was sent for, and when he came the sick man began to say, in a voice meek as Moses's, that he wanted to die at peace with all his fellow-creatures, and he hoped he and Brown could now shake hands and bury all their enmity. The scene was becoming altogether too pathetic for Brown, who had to get out his handkerchief and wipe the gathering tears from his eyes.... After a parting that would have softened the heart of a grindstone, Brown had about reached the room door when the sick man rose up on his elbow and called out to him: 'But see here, Brown; if I should happen to get well, mind, that old grudge stands.'ⁱⁱ

It isn't always simple or easy to forgive; it may be as hard as anything Jesus asks of us, but still he ASKS, URGES, DEMANDS that we who would be his disciples forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts.

It is not that simple, for many of us hold on to wrongs done to us with hardened hearts that refuse any prospect of forgiveness or reconciliation. The sin is unforgivable or the wrongs too numerous to be forgiven. The pain is too great; our anger too hot; our hearts too wounded. We cannot, or will not, or choose not, to forgive. We will obey the Bible, but we prefer the vengeful sentiments of the psalmist:

O God, break the teeth in their mouths... like grass let them be trodden down and wither. Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime.

Or in the words of the taunt from my youth: *May the fleas of a thousand camels infest their armpits!* We are better trained in the vocabulary of vengeance than we are in the language of mercy in a culture that too often regards mercy as weakness and vengeance as justice.

So then, must I forgive the brother or sister who has wronged me? If so, how often? It is a question that is as real as the wound in your heart or the stony silence between neighbors. It is a question as real as the face of the person who you struggle to forgive. Is there someone who has done you wrong, a person who you cannot or will not or do not want to forgive? Perhaps it is a parent or child from whom you are alienated over some

family dispute; or someone with whom you work who has slighted you; or someone in this church, a brother or sister in Christ, for whom your anger burns; or perhaps it is a President or terrorist whose very name causes your blood to boil. Has your unrelenting anger created a crisis of forgiveness and caused you to ask with Peter: If my brother or sister sins against me, how many times shall I forgive him? What are the limits of my obligation to forgive?

How interesting that it is Peter who asks that question, for if to err is human, then Peter by all Gospel accounts proves himself the most human of all the disciples. He errs and offends and ultimately denies his Lord three times before the cock crows, yet dares to ask, "How many times must I forgive?" He offers a fairly generous response to his own question, "seven times?" To which Jesus responds, "Not seven, but seventy times seven," – 490 by calculation, meaning "without limit." Then, Jesus tells this parable.

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who is settling accounts with his servants. One servant owes ten thousand talents, the equivalent of 150,000 years of his wages. It is hyperbole; the servant simply owes more than he could ever hope to repay. The king orders that the servant, his family and possessions be sold to recover what little can be gained toward the debt. But, the servant throws himself on the mercy of the court and promises to pay the king. Everyone knows he can never repay that debt. The king knows too, yet out of pity the king forgives the debt and releases the servant.

Peter is that servant. The paralyzed Lebanese woman is that servant, and so is the militiaman who shot her. You and I are that servant. Saddled with debts we can never repay, with wrongs for which we can never make amends, with sins we commit over and over and over again, we throw ourselves on the mercy of the divine court, admit our sins, and promise to live a better life. God knows that we can never repay the debt, knows that we will go and sin again, but in mercy and love God forgives us. We are forgiven only because God is merciful toward us. There is no limit to the number of times that God forgives us, for God's mercy is broader than we can imagine and deeper than we deserve. Yet that does not answer Peter's question, for his question is not "How many times will God forgive us?" but "How many times must we forgive?" So the parable continues.

Immediately upon his release the freed servant runs into a fellow servant who owes him a much smaller debt, a hundred denarii, about a hundred day's pay. In self-righteous anger the newly freed servant seizes his debtor by the throat and demands immediate payment. In a repetition of the exact words the freed servant has just spoken to the king, this debtor pleads for mercy and promises to make payment, a promise he might well keep. Yet the newly freed servant has no patience, shows no mercy, and has the pleading debtor thrown into prison until the debt is repaid.

All of this comes to the ears of the king when other servants tell him what has happened. Instead of griping about the injustice the servants intercede with the king and thus become agents of divine justice. The king summons the servant whom he has released and condemns him, saying: *You wicked servant! Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you? Having been forgiven so much, could you not forgive a little?* And in anger the king hands the servant over to be tortured until he pays his entire debt – 150,000 times his annual wage – in other words, for all time! *You too will experience the wicked servant's fate, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart, says Jesus.*

This is a parable about being forgiven forgivers, those forgiven by God and called to forgive others. You and I are the servants in need of the mercy and forgiveness of God, and that same God calls us to forgive our brothers and sisters. Each week we pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us," but what we really mean is, "Forgive me my sins and I'll get back to you about that so-and-so who wronged me." Somehow we dare to imagine that we should be forgiven while at the same time withholding forgiveness from others. Is there someone, anyone, who you cannot or will not or don't want to forgive?

Across the years there have been a host of examples of extraordinary forgiveness: Holocaust survivors who forgave their Nazi guards, the father of an Oklahoma bombing victim who forgave Timothy McVeigh, the Amish families who attended the funeral of the man who killed their children in a Lancaster schoolhouse, Mary who forgave the militiaman who shot and paralyzed her, Jesus who forgave the Roman guards who crucified him. If Jesus' words sound good in principle but impossible in reality, perhaps it is

only because we excuse ourselves too easily. We say, “They are better people than I am,” to which Jesus responds, “Then be like them.”

To err is human, to forgive divine, we say. Since we are not divine, we really can't be expected to forgive everyone. Forgiveness is between the sinner and God. Let God settle it based on what is just. Let God decide whether to forgive those who sin against us or not. It is not our job; we're just human. But Jesus makes it our job, for he makes clear that forgiveness is not just divine work. We are to forgive as we have been forgiven; we are to forgive **because** we have been forgiven. How can we dare to withhold forgiveness when God has not withheld forgiveness from us?

To err is human. To sin is human. To be angry is human. To get even is human. But to forgive through the power of God in Christ Jesus is divine, truly divine. “I forgave him because my God forgave me,” said Mary. “It's as simple as that.” So it is! Amen

ⁱ Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, HarperCollins: 2006, pp.68-69

ⁱⁱ Abraham Lincoln quoted by Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, Simon & Schuster: New York, 2005, p.711