

“Forgiveness ~ Harder Than It Sounds”

Dr. D. Jay Losher, Jr.

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Matthew 18:21-35 = the unforgiving servant

My friend and colleague Blair Monie early in his ministry preached a sermon on this very text. The point he made was on the importance of forgiving those who have done evil to us ~ not just seven times, not just seventy times, but seventy times seven.

With hubris born of inexperience, Blair thought he had done a pretty good job. However, that next Tuesday, a local therapist frantically called him up and said her case load from the congregation had gone berserk, because abused persons in the congregation had no way to reconcile themselves with Jesus’ requirement of infinite forgiveness.

Blair, the very next Sunday preached a sermon entitled: **“Forgiveness: Yes, But....”**

Luke remembers Jesus giving us the “Yes, But....” while Matthew is more absolute. Luke records:

“Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”¹



So with Luke, forgiveness is conditional on repentance. We only have to forgive if the other person repents. If there is no repentance, then we don’t have to forgive, right? We can see how that may seem to get us off the hook. What if the repentance is insincere, forced or false? This would seem to give us permission for our forgiveness to be equally false: with a sarcastic “Sure, you’re forgiven.”



Yet forgiveness is hard even when remorse is present. In the midst of the Third Reich and suffering the horrors of the Holocaust, Simon Wiesenthal was pulled out of the

concentration camp. Wiesenthal was forcibly brought to the deathbed of a dying Nazi who wanted to confess his unspeakable acts to “a Jew.” Wiesenthal found it impossible to offer the forgiveness and absolution the torturer and murderer desired.² Jew, Christian or of any other faith, who among us could have offered pardon under the circumstances? No, I assure you living forgiveness can be extremely hard, even when there is repentance.

How much more difficult is forgiving when there is no repentance? After almost three quarters of a century there are still some living who speak of how difficult it is to forgive Japan for Pearl Harbor, to forgive Germany for the Holocaust. God bless him, my first father-in-law, Bill Higgins, to his grave would not purchase a German or Japanese automobile. He did not want to have any dealing with the enemy, even though now closest allies. People have long memories.



Many of us living decades from now will not be able to pardon those who killed thousands by flying planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. And there it is, the big elephant in the room for our generation. Perhaps 9/11 is and will remain totally unforgivable among those who lived through it.

Nevertheless if we can rise to living by forgiveness, Jesus promises this can have clear effect on us. There are indeed shining examples of persons who try to live out the forgiveness Jesus encourages with real positive effect on lives and communities:

- Bud Welch who lost his daughter Julie in the Oklahoma City bombing, who from that horrendous experience and struggling with his faith became a campaigner against the death penalty in general and against the death penalty in particular for Timothy McVeigh. He even cultivated a relationship with McVeigh and his family, a relationship based on forgiveness and reconciliation.³

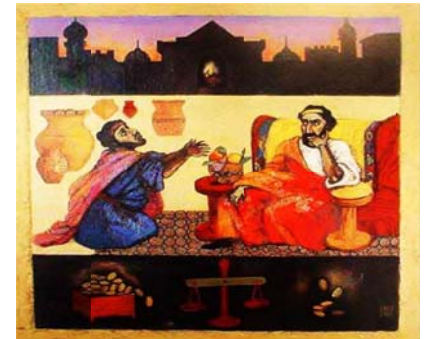


- And the Amish community in Lancaster PA gathering around the family of the shooter who had walked into their school, killed the children and shot himself. Amish members came over the very night of the tragedy to comfort his mother, to offer ministry and words of forgiveness. A parent who had lost two daughters was the first to offer the mother condolences at the funeral.⁴



Forgiveness does indeed have power, positive power to change us and transform our communities. Jesus knew this. Jesus wants us to have the power which comes from letting go and forgiving those who hurt us.

What a dilemma for us! In this parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus hopes to inspire us to forgive beyond what we believe to be our capacity. Peter assumes his capacity is perhaps seven acts of forgiveness, but Jesus responds that he knows Peter's capacity is much greater than that. In biblical parlance, Jesus' seventy-seven means unlimited times to absolve.



This is one of the hardest, if not the hardest saying of Jesus. Even harder than **“take up your cross and follow me”** because in addition to taking up a cross, we are called on to forgive those who would crucify us. How impossible is that?

It is not easy to forgive, but actually quite hard. Yet according to Jesus, forgiving not only gains us pardon for ourselves but gains us the only true, real freedom we can ever experience. Living by forgiving has the power to free us from the corrosive toxins which cling from resentments long held ~ free us from our souls' destruction when desires for vengeance remain long simmering.

Forgiveness
The Key to Freedom

But why seven times, or seventy-seven times, or even seventy times seven?

When I was a boy, the most direct path to get to the homes of my grandparents and any number of friends, was past the high school practice field.



Almost every time I passed whatever the time of year, I would see a lone figure at the field practicing hour after hour. He would throw a whole bag of heavy, leaden shotputs, gather them all up, drag the heavy bag back to the mound and throw them all over again. Afternoon after afternoon, day after day, rain or shine, he was always there, always practicing.

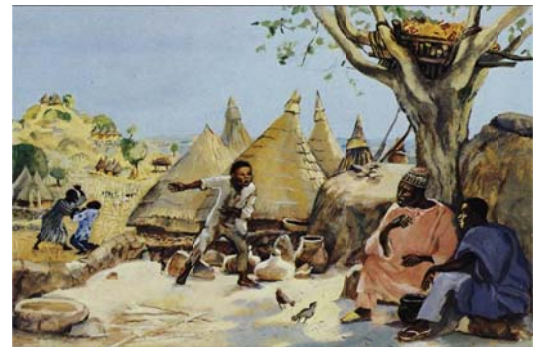


Everyone in town knew him, Randy Matson. By the time I was in high school Matson was an Olympic gold medalist. We all cheered him on. By the time I was in college, he had been declared the greatest shot putter of all time. For decades his record stood as the only human to have ever thrown a shot put beyond

70 feet in the Olympics.

They say that it takes at least 10,000 hours of practice to achieve mastery in any field. Jesus says forgiveness is like that. It takes practice. More than seven times every day. More than seventy-seven times. It takes practice day after day, rain or shine ~ practice over and over until we can truly master this forgiveness business.

Jesus knows that we have bigger fish to fry than harboring resentments imagined or real. Jesus knows we have a higher calling than cultivating desires to retaliate. Jesus knows the only way to break the cycle of escalating reprisals is to find a way to seek, find and dig out within ourselves those places where bitterness hides.



Jesus knows we have to be encouraged to let go and to practice, practice, practice letting go, so he dangles a carrot out there ahead of us: in the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." As we increase our capacity to forgive, so shall we find ourselves forgiven.

Having experienced the overpowering grace of God towards our own regrettable acts uncounted, we cannot fail to cultivate just the same generosity of spirit toward every other person ~ forgiving trespasses and debt, hurts, slights, pain and suffering inflicted ~ and sin! It is never easy. It does take practice.



¹ Luke 17:3-4

² drawn from Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower* quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics* for 15 September 2002, pp.14-15.

³ *Lectionary Homiletics* for 15 September 2002, p.14.

⁴ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/mother-of-amish-school-shooter-shares-amazing-story-of-forgiveness/>