

Who is forgiveness for?

Text: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Judy bumped into her friend Evelyn and immediately asked, "Forgive me for asking, but I've just heard that you got married. I'm so happy for you. But do tell me - was it love at first sight?"

"You can be forgiven for asking, because he is such a funny plain little man. So no, Judy, it was love at second sight," replied Evelyn. "At first sight, how was I to know he was a multimillionaire?!"

I believe that it is quite true to say that the greatest figure in human history is Jesus Christ.

One of the landmark center pieces of the teachings of this man was about forgiveness. His teachings on the subject were rich, and wide ranging...

According to Jesus in the Lord's Prayer, forgiveness is dependent on *our* behavior. We must forgive in order to be forgiven.

Jesus disciples were very human. They conceived that the kingdom he was talking about was soon to be set up in Palestine and they wanted first divs at the seats of power. So, they fell to arguing about this. Christ rebuked them and told them power was about servanthood. Peter then asked him how many times he was supposed to forgive his brother, 7 times? And Jesus replied 70x7! In other words, we are never to stop forgiving one another. This Kingdom was to be different- servanthood and forgiveness were its watchwords; not what a secular kingdom was about at all!

Jesus did claim to be the Jewish Messiah however. When he healed a man, he forgave him his sins. When questioned about this by the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said that the Messiah had the power on earth to forgive sins.

If there was something inside a person that was preventing healing, it could very well be that some deep anger or resentment, did need to be forgiven. But in the case, of a man born blind, when asked who sinned this man or his parents that resulted in his blindness, Jesus said neither!

One of the predictions about the coming of the Messiah would be that miraculous healings would authenticate it. This was one of them. It had nothing to do with sin. In other words, we are not to jump to conclusions. There are many reasons that may not be known to us that can make us unwell.

However, it is often quite true that lack of forgiveness can make us sick. Deep seated anger can lead to disease, forgiveness can release it.

When in Stratford, years ago, I had a man in the larger community come to see me. He was dying of cancer. After counseling, I discovered that he was deeply angry. So, I set up a meeting with the man he was angry with and asked them to resolve it, for it was literally killing him. Both parties agreed and after re-establishing a right relationship, they forgave one another and the dying man got better from cancer, living another ten years.

It definitely, is not always true, to say that if you have cancer, you must have a deep-seated anger. But, if we are angry and it is tearing us up, we would do well to choose a path of forgiveness for our physical and spiritual wellbeing.

Why?

Because lack of forgiveness impacts the immune system. It can depress us. We lose sleep. It is definitely not smart to hold onto a grudge.

When we do something wrong, or make a mistake, or betray a trust and we become aware of it, then we need to act, and apologize as soon as we can. **The person who was hurt by us does not have to accept the apology, although it would be a great idea;**

How the apology is received is none of our business. Similarly, when we forgive another person who has harmed us, it is none of our business how our forgiveness to them is received.

Remember that Jesus on the cross said “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”? This was forgiveness in the worst possible context of indescribable suffering. It was no concern of Jesus, how his words would be received by the Roman soldiers, the Jewish authorities and his tormentors. That was between them and God. **He just forgave them and asked God that they be forgiven.**

Jesus was a liberator. He was someone who went around releasing other people’s guilt. The Aramaic translation of the Lord’s Prayer, in the section that we know as “forgive us our trespasses” says we are forgiven when we ask God to “Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of others' guilt.” That is profound.

If you need to apologize, get it done. If it is not accepted, it is none of your business. If you have been hurt, don’t whatever you do nurse it! even if you never receive an apology. Let it go. Jesus would and did that even on the cross!

It is really wonderful when leaders can forgive. I was totally impressed when Pope John Paul the second, forgave his would-be assassin.

The first attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II took place on Wednesday, 13 May 1981, in St. Peter's Square at Vatican City. The Pope was shot and wounded by Mehmet Ali Ağca while The Pope was entering the square. The Pope was struck four times, and suffered severe blood loss. Ağca was apprehended immediately, and later sentenced to life in prison by an Italian court. The Pope later forgave Ağca for the assassination attempt by visiting him in his jail cell. He talked with him, held his hands from time to time and on leaving shook his hands. This is what he said: "What we talked about will have to remain a secret between him and me, I spoke to him as a brother whom I have pardoned, and who has my complete trust."

Wow!

The man was pardoned by Italian president Carlo Azeglio Ciampi at the Pope's request and was deported to Turkey in June 2000.

Now that is forgiveness!

Can we ordinary people forgive deadly encounters?

A news article writes:

“Imagine being in your car, peacefully driving, when suddenly something rock-hard shatters your windshield, hits you and breaks nearly every bone in your face. It turns out that the “weapon” was a frozen turkey, hurled from the rear window of a speeding car by a teenage college student out for a joyride with friends.

That’s what happened in November 2008 to Victoria Ruvolo, a 44-year-old office manager, on a road in the far eastern town of Riverhead on Long Island. She could have been killed, and she could have had brain damage. Surgeons had to rebuild her face, using metal plates and screws.

But remarkably, she recovered and within a few months was back on her own and working again.

But that's not the end of the story. It's what happened the following August in court that makes this a tale to remember. The boy who threw the turkey, 19-year-old Ryan Cushing, was indicted on a first-degree assault charge and could have faced up to 25 years in prison. And then Ruvolo stepped in.

She saw Cushing for the first time coming out of the pretrial courtroom. He stopped, choking and crying as he tried to apologize to her.

“For an intensely emotional few minutes, Ruvolo alternately embraced him tightly, stroked his face and patted his back as he sobbed uncontrollably,” wrote a New York Times reporter. As the young man kept saying, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it,” the woman he could have killed repeated, “It’s OK. It’s OK. I just want you to make your life the best it can be.”

Then, at Ruvolo’s insistence, prosecutors agreed to a plea bargain for Cushing, giving him six months in jail and five years’ probation instead of 25 years in prison.

One man later said that in his 30 years as a prosecutor “he had not seen such a forgiving victim.”

For his community service Ryan was directed to speak to youth in a program that, Robert Goldman, supervising psychologist for the Suffolk County Probation Department, created. When he finished his one year of community service Ryan volunteered to continue for another three years. Victoria also worked with Dr. Goldman, speaking to youth about the importance of forgiveness. They co-authored a book titled, “No Room For Vengeance in Justice and Healing”.

Victoria died in 2019 at the age of 59.

On a macro political level Jesus teaching has been applied in our life time. Take South Africa's truth and reconciliation commission dubbed by the former South African premier as "Desmond Tutu's dog and pony show."

Ridiculed, as it was, it has gone down in history as the only reason South Africa avoided a blood bath after Apartheid.

Martin Luther King Junior learned to forgive his enemies.

He said; "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies."

Martin Luther King Jr. changed the course of history as Jesus did with this revolutionary thinking and teaching.

When I was in Sacramento, I learned a popular expression that was very helpful. Leaders were frequently called upon to **become adult**.

St Paul, who was a consummate adult, was able to deal with very difficult situations in the early churches.

St Paul wrote "When I became a man, (meaning an adult), I put away childish things."

What is adult behavior according to Jesus and St Paul?

- We are to forgive 70x7! For Love keeps no scorecard of wrongs.
- Being adult means that when there is a conflict on the personal level, we are not to escalate it but seek to resolve it at the lowest level first!

- Being adult means working things out calmly, one on one, as Jesus taught in Matthew 18:
- Being adult means: Start one on one. Then if the person won't listen take someone with you; if they still won't listen tell the church. If they won't listen to the church, treat them the way people who are not part of the church are to be treated. In other words, with love and grace.

Taking our toys and leaving the sandbox in anger is often a childish response. Putting up with insult and turning the other cheek is adult.

Once in Sacramento I was talking to a legislator about an issue and he said to me: "David you don't really think that issues are voted on the merits, do you?" And laughed!

But assessing issues based on the merits, rather than on bias, or fear, or political ideology, or party, is Adult.

Being an adult is to always seek a third way rather than an either/ or. As Jimmy Carter has said: "Unless both sides win, no agreement can be permanent."

- Being an adult is to learn the art of compromise and reap the synergy that comes from that. Synergy comes from a better way than either side has yet thought of!

St. Paul and Jesus' call to the world and the church, is to become Adult- to put away childish things and behaviors. If we did this internationally, we would have peace in Palestine and the Ukraine, not war. If we did this nationally, we would have prosperity because so much is lost in litigation and fighting with each other through the law courts.

If we became truly adult in the churches, we would usher in the Kingdom of God for which we pray every Sunday in the Lord's prayer.

We can make a difference in the world, making it a better place, when we realize forgiveness is not for someone else: **it is for us to receive, and to give away...**

For we are forgiven as we forgive those who trespass against us! Amen.