

### Unnatural Acts

The writer Philip Yancey, in his book on grace, tells of a fight he and his wife were having, where they were discussing his shortcomings in a rather spirited way. In the heat of the argument, his wife declared: "I think it's pretty amazing that I forgive you the dastardly things you've done!" Now, Yancey doesn't say what these "dastardly things" were. But his wife, he reflected, whether she realized it or not, Yancey's wife offered a sharp insight into the nature of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some sweet ideal to be dispersed in the world like Febreeze air freshener. Forgiveness is achingly difficult, and long after you've forgiven, the wound—another's "dastardly deeds"—lives on in memory. Forgiveness is a frankly *unnatural* act, and Yancey's wife was protesting its blatant unfairness.

Much the same sentiment is conveyed in our first reading this morning from Genesis. You know the story of Joseph—how he'd been the favored son of his father Jacob, how on account of his brothers' jealousy he'd had been sold into slavery and sent to Egypt as a slave where he was falsely accused, imprisoned, then released and ultimately rose to become the Pharaoh's right-hand man, put in charge of Egypt's immense grain stores. It was in this capacity that he met up with his brothers again, when a drought brings them to Egypt for food. After some shenanigans, Joseph and his brothers finally reconcile, which is where our lesson picks up. When you hear this story for the first time—as a child, perhaps—it's hard to understand the loops and twists in the account of Joseph's dealings with his brothers. One moment Joseph acts harshly, throwing his brothers in jail; the next moment he seemed overcome with sorrow, leaving the room to blubber like a sad drunk. He played tricks on his brothers, hiding money in their grain sacks, seizing one as a hostage, accusing another of stealing his silver cup. For months, maybe years, these intrigues dragged on until finally Joseph could restrain himself no longer. He summons his brothers and forgives them in the dramatic scene we just read.

As we grow up, though, and experience hurt and betrayal first hand, we come to see that story as a realistic depiction of the unnatural act of forgiveness. The brothers Joseph struggled to forgive were the very ones who had bullied him, had cooked up schemes to murder him, and sold into slavery. Because of them Joseph had spent the best years of his youth moldering in an Egyptian dungeon. Though he went on to triumph over adversity, and though with all his heart he now wanted to forgive these brothers, he could not bring himself to that point, not yet. The wound still hurt too much. And so the games Joseph plays on his brothers upon their appearance in Egypt, are just Joseph's way of saying, "I think it's pretty amazing that I forgive you for the dastardly things you've done!"

It is indeed pretty amazing, for forgiveness goes against our nature. "I and the public know/Which all school children learn,/Those to whom evil is done/Do evil in return." W.H. Auden, who wrote those lines, understood that the law of nature admits no forgiveness. Do squirrels forgive dogs for chasing them up trees or dolphins forgive sharks for eating their playmates? 'Course not. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, not dog-forgive-dog. The same goes for us humans. Our financial, political, even athletic institutions run on the same unrelenting principle. Umpires never announce, "You were really out, but because of your exemplary spirit I'll call you safe." Nor do banks ever say, "Yes, I see here

that you borrowed \$300,000 from us and now you say you can't pay it back. What do you say we just forget about it?" It just doesn't happen. That's not how things work.

The more natural response, when we've been wronged, is like what we see among the Roman ruins of Bath, England. In the ruins there, archeologists have uncovered various "curses" written in Latin and inscribed on tin or bronze placards. Over a millennium ago, users of the baths tossed in these "prayers" as offerings to the gods of the bath, much as we today toss coins into fountains for good luck. One such placard asked for a goddess's help in blood vengeance against whoever stole his six coins. Another read, "Docimedes has lost two gloves. He asks that the person who has stolen them should lose his mind and his eyes in the temple where she appoints." A little harsh, maybe, but we have to admit, it makes sense. Why not employ divine power to assist us with human justice here on earth? As we saw a few weeks ago, several of the Psalms express the same sentiment, imploring God to avenge wrong done to the psalmist. "Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer," the psalmist prays. "Upon the wicked, rain coals of fire and burning sulfur," "run them off and aim your arrows at their faces." If our God is a just God, why shouldn't we enlist Him to meet out justice in our favor?

And yet stunningly Jesus instructs his followers to forgive their enemies and do good to those who hurt them. We are to forgive as much as 490 times, seven times seventy, as he tells Simon Peter in our Gospel this morning. To make his astounding point clear, Jesus then tells a parable about a slave who is mercifully forgiven a huge debt, "ten thousand bags of gold," the equivalent of \$150 million today, a huge sum. But then he refuses to show any mercy to a fellow slave who owes him something on the order of \$1000. Hearing of the forgiven slave's lack of compassion, the master turns the servant over to jailers to be tortured. And here's the zinger: Jesus says, "And this is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you, unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Many of us, I suspect, *really* wish these words were not in the Bible. But there they are, from the lips of Christ himself. God has granted us a terrible power: when we deny another forgiveness, we reject forgiveness for ourselves. In some mysterious way, divine forgiveness depends on us. We've heard this before, of course, in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses (literally, "debts") *as we forgive those who trespass against us (those indebted to us).*" Someone once said that the scariest word in the entire New Testament is that tiny little word "as"—as we forgive—for it plainly links our forgiveness by God with our forgiving-ness of our fellow human beings. "If you do not forgive others their sins," Jesus warns, "your Father will not forgive your sins."

We may wonder, why would God require of us a patently unnatural act like this that defies every primal instinct? What makes forgiveness so important that it becomes central to our faith? The Gospels give a straightforward answer: it's because our salvation depends on it, on forgiveness. It's because our salvation depends on it. You see, the same hard-heartedness that prevents us from forgiving others also keeps us from accepting God's forgiveness. If we close ourselves off from compassion for others, we close ourselves off to God's compassion, too.

And yet, we struggle to bring ourselves to forgive. It is unreasonable to expect a woman to forgive the terrible things her abusive husband did to her just because he apologizes many years later, totally unfair to ask that parents forgive the drunk driver that ended their daughter's life, completely unconscionable to forgive what the Japanese did to the Chinese in the 1930s or what the Hutus did to the Tutsis in Rwanda or what Al Qaeda did on 9/11. The very idea is a scandal. It just doesn't seem right, doesn't seem fair. And indeed it isn't. Forgiveness is unfair, which is one of the hardest things

about it. When we've been hurt or betrayed, we feel wronged, and we can think of a hundred reasons not to forgive. *He needs to learn a lesson. I don't want to encourage irresponsible behavior. I'll let her stew for a while; it will do her good. She needs to learn that actions have consequences. How can I forgive if he's not even sorry? I was the wronged party—it's not up to me to make the first move.* So we make no move, and cracks in the relationship appear, then widen until a chasm yawns open that seems impossible to cross.

Helmut Thielicke, a German who lived through the horrors of Nazism, wrestled with his resistance to forgive. Reflecting on the struggle, he wrote:

This business of forgiving is by no means a simple thing.... We say, "Very well, if the other fellow is sorry and begs my pardon, I will forgive him, then I'll give in." We make of forgiveness a law of reciprocity. And this never works. For then both of us say to ourselves, "The other fellow has to make the first move." And then I watch like a hawk to see whether the other person will flash a signal to me with his eyes or whether I can detect some small hint between the lines of his letter which shows that he is sorry. I am always on the point of forgiving., but I never forgive. I am far too just.

The only remedy, Thielicke concluded, was his realization that God had forgiven his sins and given him another chance.

This is the lesson of the parable of the unforgiving servant. God is the king in the parable, who has forgiven a huge debt—our sin—which we could never repay. So God paid it for us. God took the initiative in sending Jesus to us, in his dying for us. On the cross the logjam between justice and forgiveness was broken. Instead of waiting for our neighbor to make the first move, we see that God took the initiative with us. In forgiving our neighbors we are responding to what God has done for us. Forgiven, we forgive. Fit-fully, perhaps, like Joseph. But we do it nonetheless, because such grace has already been extended to us.

We may never find forgiveness easy, and rarely do we find it completely satisfying. Nagging injustices remain, and the wounds still cause pain. Yet we can bring those hurts, those concerns, to God, and ask him to give us the ability to forgive those – alive or dead – who have hurt us, even if we have distanced ourselves from them for good reason. Indeed, that is the only way we can, because we don't have the ability; as I have said, it's not natural. But we can pray for God's help to forgive others. And we can pray to forgive ourselves some of our own regrets, mistakes, and hurts. And we can pray that we are able to accept the forgiveness of others when it is extended to us. And above all, we can pray that God keeps bringing us to church week in and week out, so that we hear of God's promise to forgive us and to form and fashion us into a community of love and forgiveness, a community, that is, that sees in Jesus' cross the proof of God's promise to forgive and in his resurrection the always present power to forgive others.

Now, I'd like us to spend a moment in prayer. I invite you to bring to mind one person you are having a hard time forgiving. And when you have that person in your mind, in your sights, so to speak, I want you to pray to God for that person, offering them your forgiveness. If you are not ready to forgive, pray that God will help you to forgive. And then give thanks to God for all that God has forgiven you.

*Let us pray. Lord Jesus, even from the cross, you managed to forgive us. Even after we had betrayed you, forsaken you, you did not forsake us. You forgave us. We confess that we forget the debt we owe you. Help us, in our dealings with one another, to be courageous enough to follow you down this way*

*of extravagant forgiveness. Teach us to reach out, to risk, to be the first one to act to set things right when things are wrong. In the power of the Spirit we pray. Amen.*