

Theological Malpractice

February 20, 2022

I Don't Think That Means What You Think It Means

Last night, as I was texting with a friend and colleague who just filed for divorce, he lifted up how hard it was going to be to preach this Gospel today. This divorce has been decades in the making. No one who loves either party imagines that it's not the healthiest thing for both of them. And yet, when faced with this central passage from Luke's Gospel, my friend will be spinning with doubt, second guessing, and feelings of guilt this morning.

That wasn't Jesus' intent with this passage. In preaching "forgive your enemies," Jesus wasn't saying, "stay in relationships that demean and destroy." In fact, if anything, he was saying the exact opposite. And while abuse was not a factor in my friend's relationship, it's important for me to note right up front here that Jesus' teachings about forgiveness do not mean that you are to stay in abusive relationships. We'll have more on this later.

Many people think the Golden Rule, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is the center of Christianity, but I would suggest to you today that it's actually "do unto others" in tension with "love your enemies." I bring up my friend preaching about love of enemies while he's at the outset of divorce proceedings, only as a frame of reference for us today. Jesus isn't talking about forgiveness in some abstract way. Nor when he talks about enemies are we to think "nazi" or "supervillan." He's talking about forgiving the people we live with. He's talking about praying for that jerk of a boss who stole your idea and presented it as their own. He's talking about doing unto your ex as you would have done unto you.

So first, a refresher on what forgiveness is and what forgiveness is not: (A lot of people get this first point wrong). Forgiveness is not, inherently for the other, the person who has been wronged. When you forgive someone, it may or may not repair a relationship. It may or may not give the other person a feeling of release or reconnection.

But fundamentally, forgiveness affects the forgiver. Forgiveness is the dynamic of no longer allowing the person and actions that have hurt you to have power over you. It's no longer allowing the hurt that someone has done (and sometimes that someone is even yourself) to contort and disfigure your soul and your psyche.

Second, nowhere in the Bible are we told to "forgive and forget." In fact, a much more Biblical way to approach it would be "forgive and learn" or "forgive and do better."

Third, forgiveness does not mean allowing someone to revert to old hurtful behaviors. It doesn't mean that what they did was okay, nor that they can do it again.

Second, love of enemies. This may be the real genius of this passage. When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he's calling us to be better than our base instincts. Our base instincts are to return tit for tat. Our base instincts are to fight fire with fire, to stand our ground, to retaliate. Everywhere we look, this is the rule of the day, either retaliating when we've been wronged, or even going on the offensive so that we don't get hurt in the first place.

I'd like to suggest to you today that the genius of Christianity is to pull us out of that, to call us to a new and better way. You've heard the phrase, "an eye for an eye and the world goes blind." Christianity, at its absolute core, is a belief system that calls us to be better than our instincts. Rather than kicking back when we've been kicked, Jesus calls us into love and forgiveness and healing.

Kalen Dion is an artist and poet who writes:

Your trauma does not excuse abusive behavior. Not ever. You have to do whatever is necessary to make sure that you don't turn into your abuser.

Get therapy. Get sober. Work a program. Make amends. Forgive. Move on. Anything it takes to find peace and do better.

But whatever it is that you do, you need to stop paying your pain forward to those who haven't hurt you.

In calling us to forgiveness and love of enemy Jesus is laying out a path forward that does not lead to mutual destruction, but rather the healing and the flourishing of the world.

Theological Malpractice

Now, for many of us, this is plenty to sit with, plenty of spiritual fodder to nourish us and sustain us and give us direction for the coming week and beyond. But when I was interviewed for the HerStory exhibit at the Neville Museum, one of the questions they asked was how I think my ministry is different because I'm a woman. I answered that preaching from a woman's perspective can take us down very different roads than many of us have heard the Gospel taken before, and today's passage is one of those times.

You see, it's impossible for me to look at this passage without acknowledging how it has been used to hurt and demean and control people. Call it theological malpractice, when people who have been abused or otherwise victimized are then told that the Godly thing to do is to forgive. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that those who have been abused and victimized should hold onto their pain. I fully advocate for doing the hard work of healing.

I'm saying that far too often, "love your enemies" has been contorted into "allow yourself to continue to be victimized," and that was never Jesus' intent. What this comes down to is power. Think of it this way: Imagine yourself as a first grader on a playground. You find yourself surrounded by a group of middle schoolers. They're considerably older, bigger, and there are more of them. They push you down, start kicking and hitting.

Pastor Nathan Nettleton lifts up this example, and then asks:

What are your choices? What would it mean if someone were to tell you to turn the other cheek? It wouldn't mean a thing because there isn't anything else you can do. Turning the other cheek is only a meaningful instruction if you can choose it as an alternative to beating the stuffing out of someone. It is no use trying to teach someone to turn the other cheek if they don't have the power to fight.

The reason I can be so sure of this is because telling the powerless to turn the other cheek just keeps everything going in the same old way. It keeps awful, sick, disordered power dynamics in place, and nothing ever heals and nothing ever changes and that is definitely not Jesus' way.

Enfleshed, the LGBTQ writers' group where I often find our liturgical prayers puts it this way:

Forgiveness can be a holy, righteous, healing thing.
But so many dominant theologies have mucked it up for us.
Gotten in our heads and our hearts and turned it into something that hurts.
A weapon that upholds power in families. In communities. In culture. In churches.
The forgiveness-talk that many of us have inherited
tries to make us forget that there's such a thing as imbalanced power.
That power does not threaten nor silence.
That it does not weave everything intimate and personal into a larger story.
That it does not play out over and over again through patterns and practices
predictable.

At that table of reconciliation, the facts about legacies of violence, structures of inequality, ongoing norms that harm and destroy are not even welcome in the room.

Whether it's sexual harassment or anti-Black violence,
anti-queer, anti-trans, or other white supremacist harm,
inaccessibility or colonialism still unfolding,
before we even round the corner of honesty about what happened and why,
our conversations are stopped in their tracks,
turned around on us,
until somehow the conditions that enabled the harm in the first place
are declared a fresh start, a new beginning,
even though we have been there a million times.

This story of forgiveness is a lie that has stolen something beautiful.
Unless patterns and norms are disrupted...
Unless amends are practiced materially...
Unless the truth is given space in its fullness...
Unless power is redistributed...
Unless there are protections put in place to prevent further harm...
It's too soon for talk of forgiveness or reconciliation.

And using God to suggest otherwise,
to manipulate or control, to guilt or to gaslight,
to keep real healing, real hope, real possibilities from emerging
through the hard, hard work of change that restores
is spiritual violence, theological malpractice, a tool of the state in the arms of the church.

Whatever forgiveness is, it's not that.
It's never that.

Conclusion

Friends, Jesus calls us to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us. He does not call us to allow ourselves to be abused.

Jesus ministry was consistently about breaking up the status quo, about upending hurtful power dynamics, about shining the light of truth so that healing could begin.

As the Kalen Dion poem that I quoted earlier said, “You have to do whatever is necessary to make sure that you do not turn into your abuser.”

That, my friends, is the Gospel, the Good News of our God.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38
February 20, 2022