

Who Wants to Live That Way?

March 17, 2024

Northern Ireland

In our season long focus on forgiveness, today I turn our attention to what the folks at the Forgiveness Project call “the unforgivable” — things like terrorism, war, genocide — you know, a light way to end things, especially as we celebrate a baptism later in the service. This being St. Patrick’s Day, I thought looking to the decades-long crisis in Northern Ireland, often called The Troubles, would be fitting.

Just a thumbnail sketch of The Troubles: The modern conflict began in the late 1960s during a campaign by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association to end discrimination against the Catholic-nationalist minority by the Protestant-unionist government and local authorities. The conflict was primarily political and nationalistic, fueled by historical events, though it also had a sectarian dimension. Despite the use of the terms Protestant and Catholic to refer to the two sides, it was not a religious conflict.

A key issue was the status of Northern Ireland. Unionists and Loyalists, who for historical reasons were mostly Protestant, wanted Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom. Irish nationalists and republicans, who were mostly Catholics, wanted Northern Ireland to leave the United Kingdom and join a united Ireland. Over the course of the 30-year struggle, over 3,500 people were killed, more than half of whom were civilians.

The Troubles have roots in Ireland going back centuries, the dynamics of which are not entirely dissimilar to what we’ve talked about here before regarding the Doctrine of Discovery — external dominating colonists “giving” land and resources that already had occupants. In that, we can also draw parallels to the horrors that are being perpetrated in Palestine as we speak. At their core, these armed conflicts share the dynamics of in-group/out-group loyalty and violence perpetuating violence.

In last year’s PBS documentary “Once Upon a Time In Northern Ireland,” one of the most powerful stories we hear is of a young boy. In May of 1972 he was leaving his grade school. (There was an army lookout post at the corner of the playground. Just let that sink in. You know where this is going.) There was an army lookout post at the corner of the playground. As this kid — probably in fourth or fifth grade — walked past, the soldier at the post shot a rubber bullet. The rubber bullet grazed his nose and left him permanently blind.

What makes this story fascinating is that years later, he tracked down his shooter. In the documentary, he says that he wrote to his shooter and told him he would love to meet him. Eventually they did, and the man who was shot, whose life was radically altered as an innocent little boy, told his shooter that he forgave him.

The shooter’s reply? He said that he thought that he was justified. He said he never felt guilty. Hearing that was stunning to me. (I had originally written “Hearing that blew me away,” but you may recall that I’m really working hard to rid my speech of gratuitously violent imagery. The phrase “blew me away” has no place being used casually when talking about The Troubles.)

So, the shooter’s reply to the declaration of forgiveness offered by the man who he had blinded decades earlier as a little boy was that he didn’t think he needed to be forgiven. What do you do

with that? The man who had been blinded gives us some insight. He says, “If you want reconciliation, you can’t demand to meet the person you want to meet. You meet who they are.” He went on to say, “I could have nailed him to the cross, but that won’t get my eyesight back, and it won’t make me happier.”

There’s so much to unpack here. When we’re engaging in forgiveness and reconciliation, we don’t get to dictate who we encounter, how they will behave, their attitudes and perspectives on what happened. We’re back to a thread that has woven through our look at forgiveness: we can’t change the other, but we are responsible for ourselves. The man who was blinded as an innocent child, whose message of forgiveness was not received with remorse, had come to a place of understanding that re-vilifying the person who had done him wrong wouldn’t move him forward.

“What will make me happier,” he said, “is trying to find a way he and I can be friends.”

What? He just said he thought he was justified to have blinded you as a ten-year-old, and you want to be friends? I have family members who still carry grudges about who sat where during a Packers’ game in 2013, and this guy wants to make friends with the man who felt justified blinding him?

He went on: “Some people said I should have waited until he apologized, but then we never would have met. Six years after we met, one night, he said, ‘I’m sorry.’ Peace is tough. You never know how it is going to play out. It’s astonishing what can change when you let down your guard and let go of your old ways of thinking.”

Forgiveness

The Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas has an online resource, The Community Toolbox, designed to provide resources on community health. One component they lift up for building community is spirituality, and a core component in that is forgiveness and reconciliation. Building community foundationally requires forgiveness and reconciliation.

They begin by acknowledging:

“Forgiveness often requires relinquishing something that was important to you, such as giving up your moral indignation, your desire for retaliation, or your attachment to being right.”

They go on:

“Forgiving people have chosen not to perpetuate a historical grievance; they are somehow able to turn the page, loosen themselves from the grip of the past, and reframe their own story.”

As an aside here, it’s important to note that compelled forgiveness takes away some of its power. If “forgiveness” is merely a cultural or religious expectation it can place yet another burden on victims and can be something politicians and other leaders use to avoid accountability.

John Braithwaite, a pioneer of the Restorative Justice movement, wrote: “Forgiveness is a gift victims can give. We destroy its power as a gift by making it a duty.”

At its core, forgiveness, both in the case of massive, societal atrocities and in the case of interpersonal disputes, is about choosing to end a cycle of violence.

The folks at the University of Kansas recognize:

“Just as a victim may forgive a perpetrator serving a prison sentence but still see the necessity for them to be incarcerated, equally a victim may still feel resentment towards a perpetrator but see the practical sense of ending the cycle of violence.”

In other words, we can release the toxicity in our own psycho-spiritual being without allowing ourselves or others to be re-victimized. With that orientation, they lay out a five-step process for reconciliation:

1. Developing a shared vision of a fair society
2. Acknowledging and dealing with the past
3. Building positive relationships
4. Facilitating significant cultural and attitudinal change
5. Enabling systemic change.

Reconciliation also often includes the reframing of identity: First, we need to understand the originating conflict’s threat to people’s identity. (I think of terrorist attacks or even the state of politics in this country today. Reconciliation is going to take coming to understand how the people I disagree with understand our current world as a threat to their identity.)

Next in reconciliation is seeking to move individuals from singular affiliation to multiple identities; for example, away from “I am an Irish Loyalist” to “I am Irish, European, a civil rights activist, a trade unionist...etc.” This leads to separating group and individual identities which in turn leads to the dismantling of enemy images and misrepresentations that demonize the “other.” Ideally, this ends with looking for a common vision around which to unite, though sometimes what unites isn’t a positive common vision, but rather a new common threat.

The Scriptures

In our Gospel today, Jesus says:

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Friends, forgiveness, on both a personal and societal level, requires dying. Again, I go back to the Community Toolbox from the University of Kansas:

“Forgiveness often requires relinquishing something that was important to you, such as giving up your moral indignation, your desire for retaliation, or your attachment to being right.”

That’s what Jesus was talking about when he said a grain of wheat must fall to the earth and die if it is going to bear fruit. When we hold on to our hurt, our pain, our struggle, when we identify

ourselves solely as Irish or Israeli or Confederate, or for many in our country right now Christian, we fail to see the humanness of the other. We fail to see that those of other groups are God's beloved, created out of the same dust of the earth and breath of God as we are.

In our Old Testament reading today, we hear of God making a new covenant with the Israelites. God acknowledges the breaking of their relationship, forgives their sin, and then says, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." In this passage, we really see a sixth century BCE example of the process of reconciliation.

Conclusion

Friends, I chose this facet to wrap up our Lenten focus on forgiveness because of the scripture readings assigned for today, but I chose The Troubles in Northern Ireland as our object lesson because of it being St. Patrick's Day. Do me a favor. Your homework today is to honor The Troubles (and in turn our Gospel passage), not by the drinking of green beer or pinching anyone not wearing green, but by seeking out the humanity of someone or a group with whom you struggle. In 1999, I first toured the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin. Roughly half of the space is filled with antiquities – the Tara Brooch and gorgeous examples of massive Celtic crosses and such. The other half is a massive attempt to tell the story of Ireland's centuries long contentious relationship with Britain.

At the time I was there, the ink on the Good Friday Peace Accords was barely dry. What I marveled at was how they deftly told the story, the story of profound hurt and terror, when they knew that both sides were going to be touring the space. They had to acknowledge the horror, and yet in order for a different way of being to take root, they had to make sure that each other were portrayed as humans, not demons.

In the final scene of that PBS documentary "Once Upon a Time In Ireland," we hear from a man whose wife and father-in-law were civilians who were killed in a car bombing in 1993, leaving him with a three-year-old daughter. Throughout this episode, we've been hearing from him, about how long he carried around his anger. But, in the end, he says that he realized, "It would do no one any good if I were to hold on to the hurt and anger. Who wants to live that way?"

"Who Wants To Live That Way" is the title of that episode, and it's the perfect way to wrap up our focus on forgiveness. At the end of the day, who wants to live that way? Through this Lent, and all of the ways we follow Jesus, may we live a different way. Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33
March 17, 2024