

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

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PRACTICING FORGIVENESS

The importance to ones health and maturing of practicing forgiveness has been a spiritual principle throughout the ages. Prophets, saints, and religions advise us to forgive; the principle is a mainstay of virtually every religious, philosophical and psychological practiced tradition.

Why is it so important to forgive others? When we forgive we are able to constructively deal with our feelings of hurt, resentment, and self-pity, and are less likely to compound these difficulties. For if one holds a grudge against someone, one ends up bearing a heavy burden that restricts freedom and prevents spiritual growth.

Forgiveness is another word for letting go. It involves facing squarely our feelings and telling someone so we are no longer alone with our feelings of resentment, anger or guilt. If there is the possibility for repair without further hurt, we must make repair. Then forgiveness may be expressed. It is a spiritual experience that matures and develops the participants.

"You shall love your neighbour as yourself," Jesus taught. The Danish philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard declared that if anyone will not learn to love themselves in the right way, then neither can they love their neighbour. To love ones self in the right way and to love ones neighbour are in the end the same. Hence Jesus observation is, "You shall love yourself as you love your neighbour when you love them as yourself."

Forgiving love was well illustrated by Jesus in his parable of the two sons.(St. Luke 15:11). The younger son asked for and received his family inheritance early, while his father was alive and well. He left home, went abroad and spent the money. As his

resources diminished and his efforts to establish himself in new relations broke down, the younger son judged himself to have been a fool to waste his inheritance to no avail, to have cut himself off from those who loved him, and to have fallen into the miserable state in which no one cared whether he lived or died. He realized the great lesson he had learned was to value relationships of genuine love. So he decided to return home, apologize and start over again as a servant for his family.

The father, who was mourning the loss of his son, hoped and longed for the young man's return. He welcomed the boy home with ecstatic love.

But not so the older son, who cherished anger and self-righteous indignation against his brother for what he had done. His opinion was that his brother had made his choice, so let him take the consequences of his own folly. The older brother was

(Practicing Forgiveness, cont'd)

technically correct; he was in the right and his brother was in the wrong. Why shouldn't the prodigal bear the full penalty for what he had done? Yet we can infer that the older brother would feel also the pangs of guilt, against which he needed the ego defenses of repression, projection, and rationalization. To repress his guilt feelings he would project the blame upon the younger brother and rationalize that this person does not deserve another chance and should bear the destitution he had brought upon himself. The problem of sibling rivalry, which bedevils all families, makes it seem the younger son is the favoured one who displaces the older in the affection of his parents.

There is more than one way to be homeless. The prodigal had gone to another community to separate himself from his family, but the older son was homeless at home. The family relations were not yet restored and could not be so long as one remained the rival of the other.

Recognizing that persons have a basic need for a relationship of forgiving love, Jesus spoke a great deal about reconciliation, making peace, as a religious way of life.

The therapeutic value of forgiving love is now well recognized by psychologists and other professions working for mental health. The lack of such love is understood to be the principle cause of neurotic anxiety, juvenile delinquency, resistance to learning, the blocking of potential achievement, mental illness, and psychosomatic disorders.

We can set the stage for forgiveness by first trying to be understanding of those who have wronged us. To achieve understanding it is helpful to acknowledge our own

human weaknesses and admit we are capable of committing a similar wrong. At some future time we also may need to be forgiven.

Dr. Walter Rauschenbusch, a prophet of the church a century ago in the application of the teachings of Christianity to social situations, was once hurrying across a busy street and was hit by a streetcar. When the motorman began to explain that he had sounded the gong, Rauschenbusch stopped him: "I am very sorry that I crossed the street in front of you, but you see, I am deaf, and I did not hear you approaching." He then reached into his pocket and took out a five dollar bill and gave it to the motorman, saying, "Take this as a gift and forgive me."

A man with that kind of spirit must have been a truly great soul. It is hard to forgive and it takes love within us to do it. Forgiving is a model of love in action.

LOVE OR HATE?

I had just finished my pastoral visits in the General and Marine Hospital, Collingwood, and as I passed a ward I heard a woman scream.

Startled, I asked the head nurse at the nursing station what had happened. Knowing me she was confidential and explained the cries had come from a young mother suffering arthritis so severely they were afraid she would not live long. She explained that they were giving the patient the limit of morphine without terminating her life.

The nurse went further to explain the woman was a patient from a rural district some distance away and it was difficult for her pastor to see her often. She asked me if I would visit her then and now.

I sat at the bedside of the woman who was obviously in great pain. She welcomed me as a friend

(Love or Hate?, cont'd)

and as a minister. When I asked about her family she began to cry and said she had had a wonderful daughter but she had been taken away from her. She wanted to tell me about it.

She told me about her happiness as a youth in her farm community and the little rural Baptist church there, how she and a neighbouring young man fell in love, were married in the church, and set up farming on his family farm.

A daughter was born to them. The parents loved this child and adored her. She came of school age and attended the rural school down the road.

But, one stormy winter's day when the concession road was icy and snow covered, the child was struck by the neighbouring farmer's car as she crossed the road. The child was killed.

The stricken mother told me this neighbour was a deacon in their church and now she hated him. She stopped going to church, exclaiming how could she sit there and see "that murderer" sitting ahead of her. Despite all attempts at reconciliation she maintained her hatred toward this farmer, the church, and her God who would allow such a catastrophe to happen.

I prayed with her and left. But her anguish affected me and I could not forget her story. So the next day I returned to the hospital and visited her again. She welcomed me. I asked her to do something for me. She agreed and to her horror I asked her to pretend she was the neighbour who had struck and killed her child. I asked her to try and feel as he must, a neighbour, an elder of the church, watching the young couple and their daughter living next door and worshipping at the church. How proud they were of them.

THEN, that terrible day when

the child darted across the road in front of his car in the blizzard, his trying to stop on the icy road, the thud of hitting the little body, and the finding her dead. As if this was not enough now her mother hated him, could not attend church, and was wasting away in the hospital. How must he feel?

The mother started to cry and said to me, what have I done to that poor man, what can I do to repay him? I said simply, forgive him. Together we prayed and she forgave the man.

The next week when I made my hospital rounds I checked to visit this woman and she was no longer there. Her doctor came along and asked what I had done to his patient? He said he was afraid she was a terminal case and suddenly, like a miracle, she began a swift recovery and was already sent home.

Later I was able to contact the woman's pastor who told me she was in better health and back to church.

The wonderful power of forgiveness.

NEED DEFINES AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

With a growing number of conservatives eager to see the elimination of racial and gender preferences as guides for affirmative action programs a common plea to be heard is, "It isn't fair".

In promoting equality and inclusiveness for minority groups, the disadvantaged and women, there are those who feel to legislate is unfair to the mainstream, particularly white males.

Genuine justice, however, is not based simply on fairness, as fairness wrongly assumes that everyone is equal. It is quite obvious that all persons are not equal in society. As Oliver

THE REALM OF GOD AMONG US

(Affirmative Action, cont'd)

Wendell Holmes said, "There is no greater inequality than the equal treatment of unequals".

Jesus told of a farmer who employed persons to work in his vineyard at the first, third, sixth, ninth and eleventh hours. At the day's end he paid each the same wages. This seemed preposterously unjust to those who had borne the daylong burden and naturally they cried, "Unfair!" But the farmer had paid each according to their contract, and his generosity nowise shortchanged those who had laboured since dawn.

To understand this parable we have to recognize it is a challenge to every type of person. It challenges our feelings by telling us that what is fair is not what is important. It is what helps that makes the difference.

In order to treat all persons equally and to provide everyone with equal opportunity we must give more attention to those born into or placed in less favourable social positions. Our society should focus upon the needs, not group conditions.

Jesus saw society, not as a business community but, as a political society within the realm of God. In this society all are equal in value, differentiated only by our capabilities. He taught that in the midst of the unfair we are to give ourselves to one another.

The issue is not what is fair but how we serve and provide for each other.

Most of us are hungry to be a part of a better world than the one we now have. Our faith empowers us to vision a healthier world, a better society, and a future to look forward to.

The prophetic vision is a vision of what it would be like for the realm of God to prevail. Such a vision tells us we cannot be content with the way things are, because the way things are is not what we trust is intended for us. To make the vision reality we have to turn things around, make changes, and turn from being visionaries to revolutionaries.

Jesus was a revolutionary. He sought drastic changes in the social and religious life of his day. When he was asked by the leader of the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth to speak he read from the prophecy of the third Isaiah concerning what one possessed of the spirit of God would proclaim: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour".

This speaks against narrow-mindedness and selfishness. It proclaims the love of God is for everyone.

So Jesus took up the gantlet and became a social reformer, a prophet, a revolutionary for the realm of God.

All Jesus' thinking centred about the hope of the realm of God. His moral teachings get real meaning only when viewed from this centre.