

Forgiving the Unforgiveable

Acts 5:27-32

Last Sunday afternoon, on the day celebrated by most Christians around the world as Easter, the seasonal joy was disrupted and saddened by a massive suicide bomb explosion near the children's swings in a popular city park in Lahore, Pakistan. By the time the smoke cleared, over seventy people were killed—most of them children—and nearly 375 wounded, some gravely. A splinter group of the Pakistan Taliban claimed responsibility for this barbaric and cruel attack, aimed at the Christian minority celebrating their religious holiday. However, a large number of the dead and wounded were actually Muslim, who were also there with their children to enjoy a family outing. Most of the victims came from working class families and the poor—the people most likely to use public parks in Pakistan.

In many ways, it's hard for us to imagine, let alone comprehend, the absolute horror of last Sunday, since Pakistan seems like a million miles away from the village streets and playground of Noank. Even the graphic visuals of the recent terrorist attacks in Paris or Brussels don't impact us like those who experienced them indirectly or firsthand. We, on many levels, are emotionally shielded from such horror.

Hopefully, we will never face anything of the sort; but if we did, what would we do? How would we respond—especially if the dead were our innocent children or grandchildren? Would it not be with grief and outrage, if not cries of vengeance or retaliation? Would we seek justice, as in an eye for an eye, a life for a life, as the proverbial moral equation goes? What would we do if those we loved were victims of a horrific crime?

This is always the question that matters. It's more demanding than, why did this happen or who could do such a thing? Those questions have

no clear answers that would satisfy our pain. But the one that always will matter—the one that needs to be asked and answered is, what is to be our response? What would we do?

Not surprising, situations like this are often answered with even more violence. The outrage is so great, the injustice so overwhelming, that a hateful, visceral reaction wells up within people by nature. How can it not? Consequently, history's examples are endless of retaliatory attacks and full scale wars that break out as the cycle of violence escalates over the pursuit of justice or revenge.

Though, initially, victims have the moral right for justice and garner sympathy for their sorrow, once retaliatory violence is invoked resulting in further bloodshed, much of that empathetic support dissipates, especially with each succeeding strike. If things escalate (as they often do), soon both sides in a conflict find themselves caught up in a vicious spiral of perpetual violence of hateful words and actions, where each side earns their sorrows and owns their sins. This tends to be the common human entanglement with evil—a vicious cycle of violence. It sets up as a noble pursuit of justice to hold a perpetrator accountable for some terrible wrong, but often ends up being the source of further suffering, if not one's own self-destruction. Despite the righteous anger inherent to it, there never is and never will be a good end to vengeance or violence.

It's not as if we don't recognize this. We see it when people are in conflict, especially if one or both sides express violent tendencies. Look at what happens when enraged people take the law into their own hands, or have access to lethal weapons. Usually nothing good, despite our culture's fascination with glorified violence. A victim soon becomes an offender.

Our social and military histories also bear this out. Street violence begets more street violence. Wars are fueled by the grievances over casualties and atrocities that mount up on each side. No warring side is ever innocent or undeserving of their suffering. When we respond with harm to harm done to us, we create the cycle of violence which may not end until the sorrow is greater than the swagger. Most wars eventually end not with victory, but out of weariness, grief, and despair.

For this reason, I believe, Christianity's greatest gift to the human race is the focus on forgiveness as a spiritual practice. More than just a theological dogma, forgiveness is meant to break the cycle of violence, in whatever form hostility is expressed in our lives. Forgiveness is the way to deliver us from many of the sorrows of our lives.

Unfortunately, down through the ages, the Church has blunted the edge of this powerful message by making it merely a philosophical necessity before God, than as a spiritual practice in life. With "original sin" as a fundamental belief and principle concern, forgiveness has become a theological doctrine about God's gatekeeping for eternity, rather than as a living mercy for conflict.

As a result, the power of forgiveness is minimized and rendered meaningless. Pious people focus on asking forgiveness from God each day for the petty mistakes and foibles of human character, rather than for the spiritual power from God to deliver us from the relational and social nightmares of humanity. "Bible-believing" Christians are known to demonize their enemy, pack a pistol ready to kill, plot to harm their adversary at work, and then plead for divine forgiveness for cussing in front of the children. The need for mercy from God is ridiculed by such anemic religiosity.

The focus on forgiveness, as Jesus made clear in his teachings, is not for God's sake, but for our own—for interrupting and ending the cycle of violent and broken relationships within human life! Forgiveness is for freeing us from perpetuating the sins of human life—to deliver us from evil before evil makes a permanent home in our hearts!

This is evident to me in how the early disciples responded to those who were largely responsible for putting Jesus to death. This short passage from Acts occurred in the nascent period of the church, presumably a few months following Jesus' crucifixion. Even though the apostles experienced Christ in his resurrected presence, most people did not. It was not a public story or regional headline. So the standard thinking in Jerusalem at the time was Jesus of Nazareth was dead and gone; the only vestiges of his life and presence were in his disciples' insistence to keep his story alive—something the religious authorities tried to quell by reprimanding Peter and the rest.

One might assume that, under most circumstances, the friends and followers of Jesus would have been emotionally devastated by the loss of their leader—even righteously incensed over the cruelty and injustice of Jesus' arrest, his “Kangaroo Court” trial, his subsequent torture and crucifixion, and the overall treatment he received from governing authorities, even after his death. It wasn’t hard to see through the farce of their prosecution. For most rebel groups, it would have been an act of war, demanding justice and immediate retaliation. The disciples may have even garnered public sympathy, since Jesus posed no violent threat to any of them and, in fact, was a popular figure preaching nonviolence. His prophetic words would have pierced people’s souls, but to have him publicly humiliated and executed like a common criminal in a sham form of

“justice” would have been viewed as cowardly and outrageous. What the conspiring authorities did was unforgiveable—for their own warped interests, they murdered the innocent!

So when Peter and the others were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin for questioning, many might have expected the same treatment for them. If so, it could have been a perfect moment for the Apostles to speak truth to power and hold the guilty accountable.

In fact, that did happen. Except, the prophetic word to the governing religious authorities was not to defy or condemn them, but rather to offer the divine olive branch of forgiveness—a mercy offered that these religious leaders might step back from their arrogance and defensiveness, recognize the terrible error of their ways and the consequences of their actions—what they had allowed to take place and for which they were responsible. It may have been too much to expect any possible remorse on their part, unless it was provoked by the offer of forgiveness by those who were wronged—those who were their intended victims. Forgiving the unforgiveable then was possible when it was done to break the cycle of harm done, an overture of reconciliation made by the survivors and victims themselves.

Emotionally, one might figure this would be hard to do. How can one forgive what has been a terrible, unwarranted, outrageous crime against the soul of humanity? How is it possible for forgiveness to be authentic, when justice has not been satisfied? Those are legitimate concerns and deeply meaningful moral conflicts for any victim at any time or circumstance to reckon with and wrestle through. If there is nothing to satisfy the need for justice, then often the memory of such pain will smolder continually with bitterness and resentment. As I said, there is no good end to violence and to forget this truth is to torment victims endlessly.

However, there is a way to turn it around and for victims to claim a moral and spiritual power they had lost. This is embraced in the meaning of resurrection. Without the resurrection hope, without a perspective that restores to life what is lost, the disciples could not have moved forward with any measure of satisfaction. Without the resurrection, their remembrances and story of Jesus would have been about the unjust fate cast upon him and the need to hold the perpetrators accountable.

However, the whole paradigm shifted when the resurrection beckoned them toward the future—not to focus only on the terrible injustices of the past. The resurrection turned them around toward not only the future of Jesus' life, but for the intended future for humankind. That's how we are able to be reconciled in God—we transform the pain and sorrow of the past by shifting focus to the possible future—a future of reconciliation—once forgiveness has broken through and ended violence, retaliation, and hostility.

This is the profound claim of our faith! The death of Jesus marked, theologically and spiritually, the end to pursuing justice through endless resentment and cycles of violence that never compensate for the losses suffered. Forgiveness is not for appeasing God's need to reconcile with humanity; it is to announce to the human race that no more will taking a life satisfy the need for justice! Violence will only beget more violence!

The cross and the resurrection symbolize the divine call and inspiration for forgiveness that will interrupt that cycle and transform human conflicts and endless suffering to reconciliation and shalom. That's how we will be delivered from evil! With the end of violence for justice's sake symbolized by the cross, the resurrection then shifts the paradigm toward future reconciliation and building just and right relations within

humanity. This is the powerful message of forgiveness that Christianity proclaims!

To make such hope for the future possible, someone must have the courage to step up to forgive, even that which is unforgiveable, not for the sake of denying justice, but for the sake of initiating a process of building a new future that will restore hope in life. We, who follow Jesus' way, should be at the forefront of this spiritual redemption.

This morning, I hope our brothers and sisters in Christ, who suffer in the wake of their great and terrible losses from last Sunday afternoon, can find it within themselves to hold onto the inspiration and power of their faith. Without question, it takes great courage and mercy to be forgiving of those who have inflicted such sorrow upon them. It was unforgiveable killing innocent children. Except, for the sake of their futures, it must become forgivable, however long it takes. It takes a transformation of their spirits and souls from counting their losses toward dedicating their lives and memories for the future of their families, community, and country. That's the Christian witness of hope!

On this seventh day of their sorrow, may their eyes and hearts be on the Easter promise, when they defied death to proclaim: Christ, the crucified, is risen! He whose life bore the scars of human evil rises again to bring enemies together for peace, to end the need for hostility, knowing that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, ... will be able to separate us from the love of God [revealed] in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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