

Remedy for a Broken Heart

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

A remarkable and righteous moment occurred this past Tuesday that, in my mind, was a poignant contrast to so much of what we experience in our crazy world, and perhaps one of the more conscientious acts we've seen in recent times. A grieving South African woman, Yolande Korkie, stood before the world's press corps and declared that she was forgiving the members of al-Qaeda in southern Yemen, who three days earlier had murdered her husband, Pierre, hours before he was set to be released.

Pierre Korkie's death was a horrible shock and utter disappointment to all those who had carefully negotiated an agreement through the African relief agency, "Gift of the Givers"— negotiations that had been ongoing for over 18 months and were only now bearing fruit. Except, of course, Korkie, a schoolteacher by profession, was being held with an American photojournalist, Luke Somers, whom you might recall Navy SEAL commandos had tried to rescue two weeks ago (unsuccessfully so) and in a nighttime raid a few days later, were discovered as they approached, setting off a firefight, which unfortunately triggered the execution of both Somers and Korkie when rescuers were within feet of saving them.

Last Tuesday, Pierre's spouse stood before cameras and spoke from the perspective of her broken heart:

I had visualized something different; we had visualized [Pierre] holding us in his arms, and hearing his soft voice. ...But this morning, when we arrived, there was immense relief that this suffering for him was finished. ...Today we are here to choose...To choose to forgive those that caused Pierre's death. What will it help to accuse? What will it help to find out what happened? Will it bring Pierre back? We choose to let it go...We may not have him physically, but in our hearts, he will never die. ...We

have lost, but one can never regret when you have lived with people that have nothing.¹

It's not hard to imagine the bitter disappointment and sorrow in the Korkie family and the courage it must have taken for Mrs. Korkie to face the public following the rollercoaster of emotion she and her family have been through the previous days. She had a right to be outraged at both al-Qaeda and the American government.

However, no one expected her lending voice to the word, "forgiveness," let alone owning the sentiment so soon after having one's hopes and prayers dashed by senseless violence. For one who did not deserve such a fate, the forgiveness she offers from herself and her murdered husband is truly a grace that surpasses most human understanding. It is a human mercy blessing a season of divine mercy.

Forgiveness isn't a common public response to loss in this day and age, personally or collectively. Certainly, we hope to hear pleas asking for forgiveness as signs of remorse from offenders who recognize what they've done and are held accountable for their crimes. But beyond that (and for obvious reasons) we don't demand it from victims or their families. No one else has to utter that powerful word. Frankly, it seems counterintuitive to human nature to immediately offer forgiveness as did Yolande Korkie, to extend an olive branch, to refuse to redress wrong even if it's with further wrong. We expect to hear victims of violence demand justice and accountability, and they certainly deserve it. Otherwise, offenders can get away with murder, literally so, as in this case. Accountability

¹ Quotes taken from article by Richard Allen Greene and Brent Swails, "South African hostage's wife says she forgives his killers," CNN.com, Dec. 10, 2014.

is important, which is why most people would argue mercy and forgiveness aren't warranted, at least until justice is served.

For that reason, Mrs. Korkie's overture is not only unusual, but perhaps in most people's minds it is inappropriate and even offensive to some. Who is she to offer forgiveness before justice has been satisfied?

But, then, we have to ask what would accountability look like in this instance, or for that matter, in any instance? What does "an eye for an eye" mean when violence is intentionally used? Is justice ever truly achieved? What happens is, once the cycle of violence is set in motion, it is hard to end it before more damage has been inflicted than could ever be envisioned and justified by any of the combatants. Street justice, like war, just makes victims of everyone. Unlike Hollywood's depictions of vengeance, it's not pretty, it's not heroic, and it's not romantic. It's merely *justified cruelty*, whether done by an individual to another, or in a police action under a government's order. It's the zero sum of mutual suffering in the cycle of violence that vengeance and war usually bring to humanity.

So in light of this, is it possible that what the Korkie family has chosen to do is the noblest gift they could offer the world in these critical times? In all likelihood, the Korkies did this not only because it helps deescalate a tense international situation; it also helps them personally move on without the endless bitterness and hostility that clouds their judgment and harms their own souls and wellbeing. With their forgiveness, no government will have to pursue justice on behalf of Pierre. No army will have to strategize ways to put more lives at risk to attack al-Qaeda and hold the perpetrators accountable.

Retribution will be no one's righteous cause, even as the terrorists in southern Yemen invoke it. The cycle of violence in regard to the life and death of Pierre Korkie ends before it even began with the declaration of forgiveness by this grief-stricken widow. Accountability is left to God alone and to the perpetrators' consciences. It is remarkable, it is extraordinary, it is supremely gracious and courageous, but is it right? Is it just?

This is not an easy question to answer—at least not without some lingering doubt. And it's been debated since antiquity, with even biblical responses inconsistent—varying from book to book in both the Hebrew and Christian canons. For Isaiah, the answer was clear and urgent as he spoke to the exiled Jews returning from Babylon. Would they take their new found liberation to move beyond the past and return to rebuild their desolated nation? Or would they remain spiritually stuck reliving the humiliation of the past and use this opportunity to stoke the fires of vengeance against their oppressors? Was peace in their future, or war? Which one was their ambition?

For the one who would turn swords into ploughshares, there was no debate. For Isaiah, the answer came in the form of good news—a vision of shalom that Jesus, himself, later embodied and embraced. It was about letting go of the past and building the future based on what was right and good. Isaiah had already allegorized forgiveness and self-healing in the image of the Suffering Servant—a representation of Israel returning spiritually battered and bruised from a seventy-year period of great loss, coming back from their exile in Babylon to their homeland where everything they once held dear

now lay desolate and desecrated after years of pillaging and neglect. They were to be like suffering servants—not angry warriors! Yes, the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruin, the temple was destroyed, the sacred treasures of their past were long stolen and lost. Homes were abandoned and claimed by foreigners, families were scattered among the nations, the sense of loss, trauma, and emptiness were palatable.

These exiled Jews were justified in the anger and bitterness toward their enemies, but what good would that do? Should they take up arms and head back into battle, just to account for the harm done to them? When is enough, enough?

That’s the question every victim of suffering must ask and answer, because it will be answered in some way. No one can walk away from deep trauma without re-experiencing that trauma again and again until it is addressed in some healing fashion. Mental and emotional scars remind people of their pain and of who inflicted that pain, whether or not that memory is entirely accurate or worth remembering. Yet, responding in a way that only has the intention of issuing further harm, more often than not, will bring added pain and trouble upon the one seeking vengeance, perhaps even more than the one being pursued. In the real world, justice is a noble pursuit, but rarely fully accountable—at least enough to satisfy a bitter spirit.

For that reason, Isaiah proclaimed a fresh and revitalizing vision of deliverance and self-healing to the Jews:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because the Lord has anointed me;
He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
To bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And release to the prisoners;
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...

—the very text Jesus read to begin his mission, according to Luke.

What was this year of the Lord's favor? It was the Jubilee (outlined in Lev. 25), when all debts would be canceled, when people would be restored to their original land and homes, when everything would start over again with balance and fairness. Addressing the past grievances and injustices could not be the sole objective—becoming healed from the suffering was of the first order, so the past injustices could be forgiven and would not define the future. It was like a divinely-instituted default setting so everything could begin again in the simplest, most familiar, way before the harm was done to them.

Mind you, letting go of the past was not a denial of their pain or suffering, nor was it an avoidance of justice. The recompense served against the Babylonian empire occurred in its own destruction, once the Persians defeated them. I suppose, it was an eye for an eye in the grandest sense. The violent suffered the results of their own violence. Isaiah's message was to trust the Lord to bring about justice, as it often happens over the arc of history.

How does this happen? Injustice in time is seen for what it is. The powerful are eventually brought low, and the suffering ones are raised up. Justice comes, usually not through vengeance, but through the undoing of the arrogant. The mighty fall, and the vengeful warrior is destroyed through his own addiction to violence. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword. Those who are wise take this to heart and build their future, not on what brings further evil, but on what is good—not through doing harm through retribution, but through what brings about healing and restoration.

Mrs. Korkie's choice to forgive her husband's murderers and to accept the risk, if not the reality, that accountability may not come in her lifetime is both remarkable and honorable. But what many will overlook is that it's also a spiritual power she brought to the moment be redefining the terms of the injustice, by not succumbing to the evil that she has been dealt and by not being reduced to the level of hate, which would define her forever (if not destroy her), as well as those who pursue justice on their behalf with a spirit of vengeance. Forgiveness helps to heal their souls of all the bitterness and hostility that clouds their judgment and harms their own wellbeing. Forgiveness is a gift for the giver and the receiver, and it is a remedy for a broken heart.

In a similar vein, another story of loss much closer to us offers a hopeful word as well. As all of us are aware, today is the second anniversary of the Newtown tragedy. Much like 9-11, most of us can recall where we were around this time two years ago when we first heard the news of the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School, where twenty first-graders and six teachers and staff were callously killed by the crazed young man, Adam Lanza. It's hard for any of us to imagine what these families went through that horrible day and what they still carry within their own hearts to the present. Their experience has been merciless, not only for coming to terms with their losses and the regret for not having done something to prevent them, but also because it's hard to translate the emotions from something so terrible into something beneficial and good. It takes an enormous amount of courage, much like it does for the Korkies, to move forward without wanting someone punished for the past.

Personally, I've met and spoken with some of the relatives of the victims—most notably Mark Barden, who lost his young son, Daniel. When we met, the sadness I entirely expected was matched by a determination within him that something had to be done to avoid such a tragedy in the future. I credit the Bardens and other families for their resolve to not let their losses be the final word on this nightmare. Though they had no opportunity to hold Adam Lanza accountable, they have, individually and collectively, taken another course that is as transforming as forgiveness and brings about self-healing by working to prevent further tragedies.

The parents of Sandy Hook have not been paralyzed by their pain. With the support of their community and people around the globe, they have set up foundations and taken a number of other actions, such as building playgrounds in memory of each of the victims—one of which is here in Mystic. They have created the Sandy Hook Promise campaign to advocate for new gun laws, school safety, and other measures to help ensure that the blood shed by their own loved child or spouse or daughter will not be the lasting memory, but will be remembered through the good to which they have committed themselves. I have a great deal of admiration for their collective desire to heal their own broken hearts through means that bring good to bear in the lives of others.

Maybe these families, from Sandy Hook to South Africa, teach us all something about the Advent hope—a message similar to what Jesus proclaimed. That the future can be brighter if we choose not to succumb to the darkness of our world, and when we refuse to imitate or cooperate with those who are violent and vengeful, by willfully

choosing healing over harm, reconciliation over retribution, and mercy instead of malice.

When enough of us are engaged to make this choice consistently, the great hope of Advent, embodied and embraced by Jesus himself, will be realized and the human heart, along with the spirit of this world, will break no more.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
14 December 2014