

Restoring Relationship

sermon digest

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Luke 18:1-8; Romans 12:16-21

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Ernest Hemingway opened his 1936 short story, "The Capital of the World," with an amusing observation about the name of the story's main character.

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement [in M. Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 127].

Recalling the words, Moroslav Volf locates the humor of the joke at two points: obviously in the ubiquity of the name "Paco" in Spain, but more significantly, in the story's recognition of humankind's underlying longing to be forgiven. Whether we are speaking of

sons or daughters, mothers or fathers, friends or colleagues. We desire forgiveness because we value relationships, and we know that relationships cannot be mended without forgiveness [Ibid.].

Forgiveness, Volf suggests, must involve at least two actions. First, *truth telling*, i.e., naming the wrongdoing and condemning it. Volf imagines the father spotting his own Paco in the crowd, taking him to his hotel room and saying, "Paco, your mother cried her eyes out after you disappeared without a word and with all our money. You stole what we'd saved for our old age, and it looks like you squandered every penny of it. You've done a bad thing, my son." If the story ends there, the father has merely accused the son. For forgiveness to take place, the father must take a second step and give the son the gift of *not holding the wrongdoing against him*. The father continues, "But Paco, your mother and I have decided to forgive you. You are our son. Come, let's go home."

Admittedly, the exchange is, as Volf admits, "bare-bones". We feel prone to go on and fill in the lines of missing conversation between the two men. We find ourselves wanting some assurances that tough love will set some boundaries to prevent the son's continued abuse of his parents. Forgiveness, after all, must not be about turning ourselves into doormats. We want to know that the son feels remorse for his past actions. We want to know that while the son cannot undo the past, he will take steps to repair the damage he has done and work to ensure his parents' security in their old age. Justice matters, after all; and we want some assurance that justice will be served.

That's a good thing, right? In terms of our own emotional well being, society's well being and the well being of our grasp of biblical faith, justice matters. Right?

God is a God of justice. Hebrew scriptures brim with praise for the God of justice. Israel's very existence was rooted in the God who saw the suffering of a people in captivity in Egypt and acted for their deliverance. Repeatedly the Torah sounds the call to remember God's gracious deliverance and act accordingly toward the weak, disadvantaged and alien. The prophets resound with the call to societal justice grounded in the justice of God; and repeatedly the psalmists celebrate the God who executes justice for the widow and orphan, who gives food to the hungry and sets prisoners free.

Hebrew scriptures, however, also acknowledge that justice is a struggle and not only is it a struggle, but for long droughts of time, it is clearly absent from the lives of God's people. If you want honesty in prayer, thumb through the psalms. If we are at a loss to point to any higher expression of praise for God's majesty and goodness, we are also at a loss for more probing and pointed expressions of despair at God's seeming absence. Psalms of lament are numerous, long and specific. "In God we have boasted continually," one psalmist proclaims, "Yet you [God] have rejected us and abased us. . . . You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations. . . . You have made us the taunt of our neighbors . . . a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples." "Because of you," the psalmist charges, "we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter" [44:8-14; 22].

Even for the faithful, justice is never perfect. Along with reassurance that God does indeed see and hear, comes the promise and the warning: Wait on God. Wait on God's mercy and God's deliverance. More troublesome to ears attuned to the religious violence of the centuries: Wait upon God's vengeance. "Vengeance is mine, and recompense. . . . The LORD will vindicate his people, have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone" [Deuteronomy 32:35, 36]. Our discomfort escalates as the Deuteronomist continues, ascribing directly to God the promise, "I will make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh" [32:42]. Moving beyond our usual attempt to close our eyes to such passages, perhaps we can see beyond the gore that sickens us an acknowledgment that our justice, or more exactly, *punitive* or *retributive* justice, can go only so far in righting a situation. Indeed, I suspect that we would agree that history provides incontrovertible evidence that preoccupation with punitive justice itself accounts for the

most egregious instances of violence and injustice the world has ever known. If humankind is ever to be healed of its warfare, terrorism and never ending genocide, there must be something more.

God's grace and forgiveness aim to restore relationship. And so should ours. Jesus tells the story of a persistent widow, who will not let her claim on justice go, and a judge, who possesses neither fear of God nor respect for people. The widow represents the essence of first century powerlessness. Unable to inherit property, her only hope upon the death of her husband resided in the plain decency of her husband's sons or brothers who did receive his property. Failing that, her only recourse was the courts—or more exactly, the judge who, absent a jury of her peers, heard and decided her case. Although compassion and justice toward the powerless, and most particularly, the widow and orphan, were basic to Israel's faith and teaching, the judge apparently gave them no thought. The only basis for his response, the parable goes, was the goal of getting the pesky woman off his back.

On the basis of its opening words, we have often treated the parable as a teaching about persistence in prayer. And it is. In the words of one elderly black preacher, "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is" [In Fred Craddock, *Luke*, 210]. But it is also more. As Alan Culpepper puts it, the parable has a "double-edged word." To the widow and all who chafe because of want and the mistreatment of others, it is a call to hope and vigilance; but to the judge and any who similarly hold power and influence over the lives of others, it is a call to act on behalf of justice [*Luke*, 340].

That justice in this world is imperfect is not an excuse for those of us made more in the likeness of the judge than the widow to abandon our efforts on its behalf. Similarly, that in forgiveness, we determine not to hold another's wrongs against him or her, does not mean that justice is inconsequential. If we wait until all of the scales are leveled and all of that which was lost is restored or punished, however, forgiveness often will not and cannot happen. Jesus calls us toward another model—the model of one who earnestly desires to heal broken relationships by making a way back home. The model of *restorative* rather than retributive justice.

Paul picked up on Jesus' counsel concerning the treatment of those who have sinned against us [Romans 12:1-8]. "Do not repay evil for evil." Put aside the extraction of an eye for an eye, a pound of flesh for a pound of flesh, which leaves everyone blind and wounded. With the Deuteronomist Paul counsels, "leave vengeance to God." With the Teacher of Wisdom he urges, "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink," for in so doing you "heap coals of fire upon their heads" [cf. Proverbs 25:21]. A means up upping the ante and hitting them harder than they hit us? No. A way of bringing them to repentance and the possibility of renewed relationship.

Jesus' and Paul's counsel for treatment of the enemy reflects the graciousness of God in Christ. Rather than setting up an obstacle course of austere retribution and demands, God, Jesus says, meets the prodigal child in loving forgiveness even as we are on our way home.

So, when it comes to forgiveness, the matter of justice is important; but it involves a justice that goes beyond the never ending chase of balancing the scales. Modeled after the God we know in Christ, it is about the risk of taking a surprising initiative toward one who has wronged us and opening up again the possibility of trust and friendship.

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