

Love Your Enemies
Matthew 5:43-48
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One of the most fascinating books ever written on the topic of forgiveness was *The Sunflower* by Simon Wiesenthal, the famous bringer-to-justice of Nazi war criminals. In the book Wiesenthal recounted a story that had happened to him as a young man. He was imprisoned in a concentration camp and part of a work crew. One day he was taken from his work crew to the hospital room of a dying SS soldier. The SS man wanted to speak to a Jew so that he might confess his sins and ask for forgiveness before he died. In the moment Wiesenthal said nothing. But he always wondered if he had done the right thing or not.

So, he wrote the story down and then invited other theologians, political and moral leaders to write responses to the story. A second edition came out in the late 1990's, the story and its themes given new life by the horrific civil war in Bosnia and genocide in Rwanda. The responses vary. Robert McAfee Brown, a theologian who taught at the Pacific School of Religion, wrote that "to forgive the Nazis . . . is to become one with the Nazis, endorsing evil deeds . . . and thereby becoming complicit in their actions."

Catholic theologian Harry James Cargas, who spent a life devoted to Holocaust studies and education, wrote "I am afraid not to forgive because I fear not to be forgiven."

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote that "forgiving is not something we do for another person." He defined it as "letting go of the role of victim."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote that forgiveness is "practical politics." We can't depend on retributive justice for "Without forgiveness, there is no future."

Alan Berger, a professor of Holocaust studies, gave an answer that many others gave—that Wiesenthal's silence was the only response that could be given.

This book fascinates and disturbs and convicts me every single time I look at it. Here is an assemblage of wise elders grappling with questions of justice, compassion, and responsibility at the extreme edges of our moral life. Fortunately, few of us ever face the extremities. Though I suspect that with the high rates of abuse, sexual assault, and violence in our culture, more of us have experienced the extremes than we generally openly admit.

The last two months as we've examined the topic of forgiveness, we have focused primarily on the mundane, everyday moments—our anger at traffic, coworkers, spouses. Today, we look at these difficult words of Jesus spoken in the Sermon on the Mount—that we are to love our enemies. How can we do that?

Ultimately, victims are faced with two choices—to desire harm be done to the oppressor or to seek a new world of reconciliation.

Our culture tends toward the former. We get great satisfaction in books and movies watching the villain get theirs and the more painful the better. Miroslav Volf calls this our "kickass culture."

But, this isn't the Christian model. The Christian idea is reconciliation and solidarity, where the villain repents and is forgiven. Volf writes, "We forgive because 'saving' our enemies and making friends out of them matters more to us than punishing them."

Miroslav Volf is one of our best contemporary guides in exploring this topic. He is a Croatian who grew up in the communist state, his own parents victims of the communist regime as his father spent many years in prison being tortured. And as an adult he witnessed the horrible atrocities of war as Yugoslavia was torn asunder. When Volf writes about the Christian idea of forgiveness, he rides from the underside of history, from the perspective of the victim of horrible atrocities and political oppression. He writes about his own parents, deeply religious people who practiced forgiveness toward their jailers and the soldier responsible for the death of one of their children. He writes that his parents forgave because they had been part of a community that practiced Christ and so had learned how to do it. It wasn't easy for them, in fact his mother spoke of how forgiveness was its own form of suffering. His books are rich and complex and wide-ranging, so there is no way in a few moments to cover all of his ideas.

He writes in his book *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* that "the Christian tradition has always maintained three propositions simultaneously." They are:

No matter how good our inclinations, thoughts, deeds, or practices are, before the eyes of the all-knowing and holy God, we are always sinners, all of us, victims included.

No matter how evil our inclinations, thoughts, deeds, or practices are, we always remain God's good creatures, all of us, offenders included.

No wrongdoing is an isolated act of the pure evil will of an individual; it is nourished by our sinful inclination and reinforced by a sinful culture.

Volf declares that forgiveness is deeply connected to justice. That when we forgive someone, we also condemn them. We name the offense. We accuse them and declare their guilt. This is required for justice to emerge. This is what creates the opportunity for repentance on the part of the offender.

But he also believes there is a type of repentance on the part of the victim. The victim must give up the dominant culture's ideas of revenge, of harming the other for satisfaction. And this can be quite difficult. And take a lot of time. But ultimately it "empowers victims and disempowers oppressors" because it humanizes the victim and declares that the oppressor's way is *not* the way forward.

In one of his richest passages he writes about what a victim will require before they can even begin the journey of forgiveness:

Before anything else, she needs Christ to cradle her, to nurse her with the milk of divine love, to hold her in his arms like an inestimable gem, to sing her songs of gentle care and firm protection, and to restore her to herself as a beloved and treasured being.

He continues:

Eventually, the time to forgive may come. She may forgive with one part of her soul while desiring vengeance with another. She may forgive one moment and then take it back the next. She may forgive some lighter offenses but not the worst ones. Such ambivalent, tentative, and hesitant attempts are not yet full-fledged forgiveness, but they are a start.

He writes that even these tentative steps, nurtured with love, might blossom into forgiveness. He also tells us that our forgiveness is almost always incomplete, for we are humans and not God. (More on this in a moment)

We might forgive, but the offender might not accept that forgiveness, for true acceptance of forgiveness leads to repentance and restitution. And so forgiveness, unaccepted by an unrepentant oppressor, will not lead to reconciliation.

What of this notion of forgiving and forgetting? I haven't addressed that these last few weeks. Much has been written on the kind of forgetting involved. Here is Volf's take on the issue from his masterpiece *Exclusion and Embrace*:

It is a forgetting that assumes that the matters of "truth" and "justice" have been taken care of, that perpetrators have been named, judged, and (hopefully) transformed, that victims are safe and their wounds healed, a forgetting that can therefore ultimately take place *only together with* the creation of "all things new."

So, here's the thing. We are not fully capable on our own of the type of forgiveness and love of enemies that Jesus calls us to. Only God is fully capable of that. Which is why Miroslav Volf is so insistent that forgiveness is really about making God's forgiveness our own. It is allowing God's unconditional love to so capture us that it overflows from us toward other people. We are consumed ultimately by love and not by rage.

Today is Trinity Sunday, when we are reminded that God's very being is a relationship, an ecstatic fellowship, a unity of love. This is the model for all creation. We are also to be an ecstatic fellowship, a unity of love, whereby we comprehend that we are related to everyone and everything and everyone and everything is deeply connected to us. Thus for true joy and the fulfillment of creation, those relationships cannot be broken. They must be healed, and love must reign supreme.

This is the vision proclaimed in today's contemporary lesson. The goal is a world without rules and rights and entitlements because it is a world of love. Perfect justice is radical, inclusive love where everyone is transformed into who God has always dreamed that they become.

One more story. This is recounted by the Dalai Lama in his submission to the book *The Sunflower*. A Tibetan Buddhist monk was imprisoned by the Chinese for 18 years and escaped. When he came to visit the Dalai Lama, his holiness asked the monk "what he felt was the biggest threat or danger while he was in prison." The monk answered "that what he most feared was losing his compassion for the Chinese."

We people of faith have a vision of radical, inclusive, compassionate love that is beautiful, but difficult and challenging. To live the life of love is to be countercultural. It requires deep and abiding faith and great courage. It is a lifelong adventure with risks and rewards. It is, finally, the only hope for humanity's salvation.