

Seventh Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/C): Forgiving Our Enemies: "Jesus, Help!"  
Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38  
February 19-20, 2022  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

It's a German word we've brought into English, referring to a feeling none of us wants to 'fess up to: happiness or satisfaction over someone else's suffering. The word is *schadenfreude* and here's a simple example. I'm driving on the Parkway and someone cuts me off while dangerously changing lanes at 80 or 85 mph. "Where's a cop when you need one?" I wonder. A couple miles down the road I see the car that cut me off parked on the shoulder, with a state trooper questioning the driver. "Ah, there is justice after all!" I'm either a **lot** or at least a **little** happy that the reckless driver got caught. I'm guilty of *schadenfreude*.

This word's been on my mind because a couple weeks ago I read a column about it in the paper. Entitled "How Do You React When an Anti-Vaxxer Dies of Covid?" and written by a Jesuit priest, James Martin (the editor of the magazine *America*), it caught my attention. He talks about our unholy pride in announcing, "See, I was right!" in any situation in which somebody else is suffering. He says our self-righteousness and glee in the face of somebody else's pain is a real faith issue:

The problem is that even a mild case of *schadenfreude* is the opposite of a "Christian value." Jesus asked us [in this weekend's Gospel!] to pray for our enemies, not celebrate their misfortunes. He wanted us to care for the sick, not laugh at them. When Jesus was crucified alongside two thieves, he says to one of them, according to Luke's Gospel, not "That's what you get" but "Today you will be with me in paradise." *Schadenfreude* is not a Christian value...

Indulged in regularly, *schadenfreude* ends up warping the soul. It robs us of empathy for those with whom we disagree. It lessens our compassion. To use some language from both the Old and New Testaments, it "hardens" our hearts... If someone coughs intentionally (or thoughtlessly) in your face on the subway, it's natural to get angry. At least for a few seconds.

But what you do with those emotions – give in to them, prolong them or intensify them – is a moral decision...

... Don't find another person's misery the subject of mirth, glee or satisfaction. Doing so is mean. It's immoral. And one day you may be the unfortunate one.<sup>1</sup>

We are naturally angry at people who put us at risk, whether it's the out-of-control wahoo on the Parkway, or those who angrily refuse to be vaccinated for non-medical reasons and are therefore more likely to get sick and infect others with COVID. Self-preservation is part of our human DNA. "Looking out for #1" is shorthand for the original sin washed away in Holy Baptism, but ego-centrism and self-worship have a long half-life. For the baptized, too, it's a lifelong battle to worship God above all else and our neighbors as ourselves. We have to pray for grace to put self-interest on the back burner, because that kind of self-forgetfulness **does not** come naturally. But it **is** what Jesus calls us to.

Jesus wasn't the first or last one to say, "*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*"

(Check out Homer for the Greeks, Seneca for the Romans, Confucius for the Chinese.) But Jesus definitely took it to a different level:

*27-30 "To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person... If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.*

*32-34 If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give what you hope to get out of it, do you think that's charity? The stingiest of pawnbrokers does that. (The Message)*

*37 ... Forgive, and you will be forgiven...."*

Easy to talk the talk, harder to walk the walk. I've shared before the story of the Amish who forgave the man who shot and maimed and killed their children in that one-room schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, PA. The Amish shared with the shooter's widow and children the donations that poured in to help them with medical and burial costs. Some people accused them of not loving their children enough if they could forgive the man who injured and killed them. They responded

that they take the words of the Lord's Prayer seriously: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." They believe that forgiveness is their only option as followers of Jesus.

Corrie Ten Boom believed that, too. She was a Dutch woman whose family worked to save Jews during WWII. Their rescue efforts were betrayed and the entire family was interned at various concentration camps. Corrie was one of the only ones to survive. She spent the next 33 years visiting 64 countries, preaching God's love and forgiveness. (If you haven't read her book, *The Hiding Place*, it's a classic.)

In a 1972 issue of *Guideposts Magazine*, Corrie told the story of speaking at a German venue in 1947. She spoke about her wartime experiences, both helping others avoid imprisonment and being imprisoned herself, including at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, a notorious women's camp where many inmates became guinea pigs in sadistic medical experiments. (Those of you who have read *The Lilac Girls* are familiar with it.) Two years after VE Day Corrie preached a message of hope to the German people who not only lost the war but were still living in the rubble left by Allied bombings. To drive home the Gospel message about **the loving, saving power of God's forgiveness**, she talked about God throwing our sins overboard into the deepest part of the sea and putting up a sign for Satan: "No Fishing Allowed." It was her way of saying that when we tell God we're truly sorry for our failures in love toward God and neighbor, **we should trust that God forgives and forgets**. If the sins we confess continue to dog us, it's Satan bringing up the subject, not God.

In today's Gospel Jesus tells us to "*love our enemies, do good.*" He promises, "*Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.*" (Luke 6:35-36) It may be hard to hear, but **we** are the ungrateful and the wicked. We may prefer to hear that Jesus is referring to Pharisees and tax collectors and Romans as the

ungrateful and the wicked, but as St. Paul reminds us, “*We have **all** sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23).

Loving our enemies is never going to be easy, but in some cases it’s way harder than others. Corrie Ten Boom noted that after her presentation most members of the audience left quietly and quickly, except for one man who approached her. He was in street clothes, but seeing his face triggered a flashback to him in a military uniform with a skull and crossbones insignia on his cap. She recognized him as one of the guards who had brutalized her and her sister and so many other inmates. “A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!”<sup>2</sup> (Would we blame her if she were thinking, “Well, I’m not so sure about yours”??) He went on to say he’d become a Christian since the war ended. “I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did... but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein... will you forgive me?”

His hand was extended out to her. She remained frozen for what was probably seconds:

...but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it – I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive [others] their trespasses,’ Jesus says, ‘neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”<sup>3</sup>

It can be hard to forgive loved ones, no less downright enemies, but that’s how high the Lord sets the bar. Corrie knew many survivors of concentration camps and other human-made traumas.

She reflected:

Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.<sup>4</sup>

Corrie later wrote that in the moment:

...still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion... Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of

the temperature of the heart. “Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.<sup>5</sup>

Ever after Corrie waved off any admiration people expressed for her forgiveness of the former SS guard. She always emphasized it would have been impossible without God; only God’s grace enabled her to do what was so difficult but also so clearly commanded. When we feel that forgiving the person who has wounded us is beyond us humanly speaking, perhaps we can remember Corrie woodenly raising her hand and asking God to do the rest. Perhaps in that instance or when we’re tempted to gloat as the state trooper stops the speeder on the Parkway, we can pray Corrie’s prayer: “Jesus, help me.” Help me to be merciful as my Father in heaven is merciful. Help me remember how merciful You are to me. Amen

<sup>1</sup>James Martin, “How Do You React When an Anti-Vaxxer Dies of Covid?” *New York Times* (Feb. 1, 2022), A section, Op-Ed.

<sup>2</sup>Corrie ten Boom, *Clippings from My Notebook* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982), p. 93.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, pp. 93-94.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 94.

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