

It seems like such an impossibly high standard. In our Gospel Jesus commands us: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."¹

And a few verses later he adds, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."²

That seems so tough. A couple weeks ago Renee and I binged watched the first season of a show from last year that won a number of Emmys. I won't say which show to avoid dropping a specific spoiler on you.

But one of the most remarkable moments came towards the end of the season. A character who had been actively working throughout the entire season to professionally undermine another character at work confessed to what had been happening. It was clear that the person being undermined had no idea it had been happening. Their face was full of pain. And yet, remarkably the 'undermin-ee' said to the 'undermin-er', "I forgive you." The underminer was stunned. They didn't deserve to be forgiven. They had been absolutely rotten. Their behavior was despicable. Nevertheless, the statement was given with utmost sincerity, "I forgive you." And the two eventually embraced.

The scene was laced with powerful emotion. It was no surprise that both actors ended up winning Emmy awards.

But that's fiction. Is forgiveness like that really possible?

What if someone came into your child's school or your grandchild's school and began shooting? Could you forgive someone that did that?

Remarkably, that's what happened in 2006 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. A man brutally murdered two young Amish school girls and wounded a number of others, and then committed suicide.

Remarkably, the Amish community acted in an amazing way. One of the girl's grandfathers quickly made a statement forgiving his granddaughter's killer. Several of his Amish neighbors visited the family of the dead murderer to try to offer them comfort in their loss.

Later that week, the family of one of the dead girls invited members of the killer's family to the funeral. And later at the killer's own funeral, Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish.

The Amish in Lancaster were a remarkable example of forgiveness.

But maybe it was a bit easier because the killer had also killed himself.

¹ Lk 6:27-28

² Lk 6:37

What if the killer were still alive?

That was the case in 2015 in Charleston, South Carolina. The shooter killed 9 members of the Emmanuel AME Church. At the killer's arraignment, a number of relatives of the victims addressed him. And a number of them offered forgiveness. One woman had lost her elderly mother. In a very emotional statement, she said,

"I forgive you. You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul."

Yes, the killer will have to pay the consequences of his crimes. He was found guilty and was sentenced to death and is still awaiting execution. But the families of his victims did try to put into practice Jesus' commands:

Love your enemies.

Pray for those who abuse you.

Forgive.

Yes, those are remarkable examples of forgiveness in our world.

Eight weeks ago, on the second day of Christmas, our branch of Christianity lost one of our most famous bishops. Nobel laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu died after 60 years of ordained service in our sister church, the Anglican Church of South Africa.

It is hard to play games with history and ask questions about what might have happened if different decisions were made. "What if" is an intriguing historical question to ask. But it's not always easy to know how things would have turned out if different actions had been taken. But I believe Desmond Tutu saved tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of lives.

A decade before in the 1980s, South Africa's neighbor, Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. At that time political power passed from the white minority to the black majority. After that revolution, there was an ensuing bloodbath. Almost a hundred thousand people were killed.

And yet, South Africa had a very different experience in the 1990s when power changed hands from the white minority to the black majority. Archbishop Tutu conceived of and spearheaded the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In South Africa, there had been decades of crimes and atrocities and human rights violations committed by both sides, by those working for Apartheid, and those by working for liberation. They thorny question Tutu tried to address is, 'How do you move forward in such a situation?'

The eventual answer was called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was appointed to grant amnesty to those who would tell the truth, who would publicly give full disclosure about their offenses. Then they would have to listen to the testimony of the victims of their offenses. They didn't have to be sorry or repentant. But they did need to confess honestly to what they did. And they had to sit there and listen to how their actions affected others.

Desmond Tutu later spoke about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and why they chose to use it. He said that there were basically four options they had in South Africa. In Tutu's words:

Option 1. Revenge—you clobber me, I'm waiting for my chance to clobber you back. That's exactly what happened in Rwanda—the Hutu did something to the Tutsi—the Tutsi came back, and we had genocide.

Option 2. The Nuremberg option—not a bad option. (But in WWII,) there were clear victors on one side, and clear losers on the other side. The winners could enforce "victor's justice." And the participants could pack their cases and leave at the end. But what if everyone involved has to share the same geographic space? How do we live together?

Option 3. Do nothing. Let bygones be bygones. Let's forget the past. Let's get on with the business of living in the present. Blanket amnesty which is really amnesia. But the past dealt with cavalierly will come back. Issues will return. They will return to haunt you. Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it.

Option 4. The South African way. It didn't happen because the South Africans were particularly smart. It was forced on us because of our situation. No one won. The Apartheid government didn't win. The liberation movement didn't win. Stalemate. How are we going to live with this?

We struck on a compromise. In exchange for truth you will get amnesty. In exchange for telling us everything you know about what you ask amnesty for, you will get freedom. That way you're not saying to the victims that what happened to you didn't really happen. And you're not saying that it didn't matter. But in telling and hearing the story, people experience catharsis and healing. It's an incredible privilege sitting there listening to people who by rights who should be consumed by anger and bitterness and revenge, and you experience their magnanimity, their willingness to forgive.³

The South African experience of Truth and Reconciliation was not without its critics. But it did much to bring a fair amount of healing in the aftermath of Apartheid. And it avoided the kind of bloodshed seen in other countries.

But the practice of forgiveness doesn't have to be on such a large and dramatic scale. Small acts of forgiveness and kindness can also have a great effect. The small ways we treat others can have a ripple effect.

³ Desmond Tutu, "Nobel Peace Laureates Conference," The University of Virginia

In meteorology, they speak of the Butterfly Effect. The air currents generated by a butterfly flapping its wings in Africa can eventually grow into a hurricane in the Atlantic. Small actions can have large consequences. The little things that we do, do matter. Things can spiral upwards or downwards depending upon our behavior.

I've told this story before, but it's a wonderful story. It's a true story of two young Roman Catholic altar boys who were growing up at the turn of the last century.

The first boy, Joseph, was acolyting in a country church in a village in Croatia. During the offertory, young Joseph dropped the glass cruet of wine. The cruet shattered on the floor. The wine splattered. The priest turned and slapped Joseph in the face. He said, angrily, "Leave this altar, and don't come back."

Just a few years later, the second boy, Peter, was acolyting at St. Mary's Cathedral, in Peoria, IL. He also dropped a cruet of wine. Young Peter would later write, "There is no atomic explosion that can equal the intensity of decibels, in the noise and explosive force, of a wine cruet falling on the marble floor of a cathedral in the presence of a bishop. I was frightened to death."⁴ But the bishop looked at Peter with a warm smile and a twinkle in his eye. Then he said, "Someday, you will be just as I am."⁵ Young Peter took that to mean that one day, he himself would also be ordained.

Young Joseph, after being slapped and told to leave the altar did just that. He left, and never returned. He grew up and became an opponent of Christianity. Joseph became known to the world by his last name: Tito, the communist dictator of Yugoslavia.

Young Peter, who was treated with warmth and kindness, grew up to become one of the 20th century's most eloquent spokesmen for Jesus Christ. He wrote over 50 books. And he had the first major religious program in the history of television: "Life is Worth Living." Those of you who are old enough to remember the 1950's probably already know who I'm talking about. Peter John Sheen later took his mother's maiden name of Fulton, and became known to the world as Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen.

The ways these two boys were treated had profound effects, not only in their own lives, but in the history of the world as well. Both priests should have been forgiving. But only one was. And the boy who got slapped apparently was not able to be forgiving in the face of harshness and abuse he had received. And as an adult, he left a negative impact on the world.

The other boy was treated with kindness and warmth and forgiveness, and what a difference that made. Later, he was able to share God's love widely with many, many others.

⁴ *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen*, p. 14

⁵ *Ibid.*

It's a strong reminder that our actions have consequences. Being a people of love and forgiveness is not just a nice theoretical idea. And it doesn't just apply to extreme situations. It also matters in the way we carry on our everyday lives. The way we treat other people, even in small matters, is always important. Our everyday actions are vital in carrying out God's plan for the world. Little actions can have great consequences.

Forgiveness has been given to us. Forgiveness is expected from us.

"Forgive, and you will be forgiven."⁶

⁶ Lk 6:37