

Text: Deuteronomy 32: 31-43; Luke 6: 27-38

Title: Forgiveness and Vengeance

Date: August 23, 2009

Forgiveness- if there is a core ethic in the Christian faith that everyone agrees on- forgiveness has got to be it. Every Sunday we repeat the Lord's prayer "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." We say that- not because we like how the words rolls off our tongues- we say that because we understand that because we are forgiven people we are not able to forgive- and if we do not forgive there is something wrong somewhere. Looks good on paper- but what do we mean when we say forgive? Forgive and forget- or something else?

We saw this play out this week- as Scotland released convicted Lockerbie bomber Abdulbasset al-Megrahi because he had terminal prostate cancer last week. for those of you who weren't born yet- in December of 1988 a Pan Am 747 blew up over Lockerbie Scotland on its way from London to New York, killing all 270 aboard. Investigators quickly discovered that there had been a bomb on board. Even though everybody from Islamic Jihad to the Ulster Defense Force claimed responsibility, the trail led to a Libyan agent- al-Megrahi was convicted in 2001 and sentenced to life imprisonment because Scotland doesn't have the death penalty. The next year, the Libyan government admitted responsibility and offered to pay 2.7billion in damages.

As you can imagine, the families of those who died were upset, the English PM was outraged and both President Obama and Sec of State Clinton expressed regret- pointing out that this was not a good idea. Scotland's Justice Minister Kenny MacAskill, when he was asked why he let Al-Megrahi go free on humanitarian grounds said *Compassion and mercy are about upholding the beliefs that we seek to live by, remaining true to our values as a people. No matter the severity of the provocation or the atrocity perpetrated.*

I don't want to get into the debate of whether Judge MacAskill was right- or if this was part of a deal with Lybia- but this does give us an opportunity to talk about forgiveness in a way that transcends the personal. Both the OT and the NT link forgiveness, not with justice, but with vengeance. Justice is linked with peace, **sholom**,

that sense of wholeness and completeness when all is right in the world. But there are times when things are NOT right in the world. That is when forgiveness comes into play.

Our first passage is part of the larger Song of Moses, that final blessing that Moses gives the Children of Israel before they cross the Jordan under Joshua. Among other things, Moses warned them that God would bring them into conflict with other nations. This was not news to the children of Israel- the last 40 years had been no cakewalk- and they had developed a pretty good army. Moses tells them that God, their Rock (if you ever wondered where the term Rock of my Salvation comes from its here in verse 15) has been faithful to them through all their generations- but there has been times when God's people have not. Moses reminds his people that God has used other nations to discipline and to mold the Israelites into the people that they should be- this is a theme we see over and over again, that God is all powerful and is able to use even terrible things to bring about his will. In effect, Moses warns his people that they will not win every battle, and when they do lose to chalk it up to God trying to get their attention. For that reason, they are not to take vengeance- For God has promised to deal with the nations in his own time. Vengeance is Mine!, says the Lord- to take revenge for our own sake not only treads into God's domain; it perpetuates a cycle of violence that will not do anyone any good. Just ask the Israelis and the Palestinians!

I saw this dynamic of linking forgiveness with not demanding vengeance in the most tragic of circumstances. Dave was married to Leslie- who had been a single mom of Tanner- a Down Syndrome kid. Dave adopted Tanner all the way, spending all sorts of time- and Tanner was a great kid. In due course Katie was born and everyone could see that she was going to grow up as pretty as her mom, tall, blue eyed and blonde. We used to tease Dave about the first kid who came to pick her up. Dave was 6'2" in his stocking feet and wore cowboy boots- he could be intimidating as all hell. There was a terrible car accident. On Dave's birthday, both kids were killed and Leslie was in the hospital for months. It turned out that the guy who hit them had a health condition that should have kept him off the road- o did I mention he was also uninsured? Anyway, I was over one day when the State Troopers called. They wanted Dave's opinion as to how far they should prosecute this guy. Dave told them to hold him accountable to whatever the law said- and no more. They were not going to sue or anything like that,

that wouldn't bring the kids back. I asked Dave if he was mad at God. No, God has been with me every step of the way. Dave gave up the right to take vengeance- and so was able to let go and move forward, and experience God as the Rock of his salvation.

In Luke, Jesus makes much the same point in a different way. or passage is part of the Sermon on the Plain, Luke's equivalent of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is calling those that would follow him to a new way of life- with a new way of looking at things. Jesus often reverses our expectations- for instance who ever thinks the poor and the hungry are blessed? We normally equate being blessed with material and financial success- but the poor and the hungry will see God intervene for them. in our passage Jesus takes on the whole notion limiting the number to people that we owe good behavior to those in our immediate circle.

That seems strange to our ears- but bear in mind Jesus was not speaking to a culture that was formed by Christian ideals as ours has been. To a very large degree much of humanity still sees the world through Us Vs Them eyes. What is "normal" is that we tend only to see that we have obligation to look out for people in widening circles: first our family, then friends, local neighborhoods, larger communities, finally our country- you get the idea. And those are geographical circles- factor in race & religion and those circles get awfully small real quick. Jesus tosses that right out the window. We are no to limit our selves to loving, doing good for or lending resources to those like us- we are to love, care for and share resources even with those we consider enemies!

This is not about lets all hold hands and sing Kumbya sort of togetherness- Jesus is raising the ante. God cares for those who don't like Him- if you are going to imitate God you are going to do the same. There is a danger in trying to be like God- we put ourselves in God's place! That is why Jesus hastens to tell us to be merciful.

There is something oddly comforting is being a position to forgive or withhold forgiveness. It's a control issue- and one of the ways we know that we've crossed the line into standing in God's shoes. God is the only one who is in a position to forgive or not forgive. We are not God- we have no choice!

Doesn't that drive you nuts? That is why we hate to do it. When we hold the memory of how someone has wronged us close to our heart, we delude ourselves that we still have some measure of control over the relationship. It's a delusion of course-

what is past is past- all the good and all the bad. People do what they do for all sorts of reasons- and often those reasons have little or nothing to do with us. We are not the center of the universe- SOMEONE else has that job.

This is not to say that we are to go about our lives with semi permanent amnesia. Just where did we get the idea that forgive and forget were linked? Jesus says don't judge- he doesn't say do not make reasonable assessments. If we cross the path of someone who is dishonest- it is not our job to consign them to hell- but we don't have to trust them in the future either! Chalk it up to self preservation- if more people understood that-then Dr. Laura Schlesinger's call list would be cut in half. It is neither healthy or holy to stay in abusive situations.

Bottom line, Jesus builds' on Moses' assertion: Vengeance is mine says the Lord. We are freed from the need to hold grudges, to take matters into our own hands, or to put ourselves in God's place. When we understand that forgiveness is all about relinquishing our claim to vengeance then we can lay down bitterness, embrace grace and be a conduit of God's love to a bruised and battered world.

There are times when things are not going to go well. People may disappoint us, there may be those who take pleasure in hurting us, there may even be those who hate us. The good news this morning is that all of that is not our problem- and therefore is not ours to fix. Someone Else has that job as well. Jesus finishes by pointing out that there are distinct benefits for living with an attitude of forgiveness- a measure (in the market one would buy a measure of flour or whatever and take it home in their cloak- a measure that overflows our expectations will be ours. There is an old saying- the best revenge is living well. I can't see that Jesus would disagree with that.