

Meditation on the Practice of Forgiveness

Sometimes we notice a practice when it's missing, by its glaring absence. When forgiveness goes missing at a funeral service, it's a gaping hole, deep as a grave.

One of the first funerals I conducted as a newly minted pastor was for an elderly woman who wasn't a member of our congregation. The family requested a pastor, the undertaker called me, and I met with the woman's son and daughter to plan the service. Twenty or so people attended the funeral home ceremony; most followed the procession to the cemetery. After the graveside service, as folks stepped away from the canopy, a middle-aged man approached the coffin. He tenderly laid his head against it, and began sobbing.

"Who's that?" I asked one of the pall bearers. "Oh, that's her son, her youngest," he replied. "Years ago he had a falling out with his brother and sister; they downright disowned him. He moved away; hadn't been back in years, until today. Sad, isn't it? They didn't as much as say 'hello' to him, their own flesh and blood."

Needless to say, I was stunned... and not a little peeved. A funeral, I thought, should prompt family members to set aside grievances and draw together. Death should level defenses that wall us from one another; the grave remind us of the common ground on which we stand, and to which we shall all return. For a day, at least, the *communitas* of shared sorrow should prevail. Right?

In hindsight, I can see how my thinking was misguided. Assuming that a funeral will pave the way to family forgiveness is like assuming that having a baby will save a troubled marriage. The odds are not favorable unless those families are upheld by a community of accountability and care. (More on that in a moment.)

Forgiveness is a difficult, challenging practice. So much is at stake when we stand at the threshold of forgiveness, clutching our injuries, our resentments, our anger – wrapping our very identity in those wrongs.

No less so for those who would follow Jesus. We're the obedient elder brother who suddenly finds himself homeless and fatherless when erstwhile dad welcomes back the wayward younger son with open arms. More bewildered than a lost sheep, more stubborn than a lost coin, we stand outside with arms folded, indignantly tapping our foot, waiting... for what? For order to be restored, for rules to be respected, for the dead to stay dead, for goodness sake!

Forgiveness is a difficult challenging practice, especially for those who would rather be right than reconciled. In many of his parables, Jesus portrays the sad estate of forgiveness withheld or spurned. Then, through his very words and deeds, Jesus embodies forgiveness as a radical, life-giving alternative. Not a seven-step program – not even a seventy times seven marathon that one runs alone.

Forgiveness is a challenging way of life shared by an entire community. The world got a glimpse of this way of life after the Amish schoolhouse shooting in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. The gunman wasn't Amish, but Amish families knew him as the milk truck driver who made deliveries. Members of the Amish community went to the killer's burial service at the cemetery. This included several Amish families who had buried their own daughters just the day before. They embraced the killer's widow, and hugged other members of the killer's family. Later the community donated money to the widow and her three young children.

How do we comprehend such mercy? How do we account for it? For the Amish, forgiveness is built into their cultural DNA. For 400 years they've responded to wrong in this way. Forgiveness is woven into the plainclothes fabric of their common life. It's a shared resource, like food and tools and labor. As with building a barn, they know that forgiveness is a difficult, challenging craft best undertaken by the entire community.

Is there something about sectarian Christian communions that especially equips them to cultivate forgiveness as a way of life?

A few years ago my dad's family lay to rest his ninety-year-old sister. Aunt Margaret was baptized as an infant in the Presbyterian Church, then re-baptized as an adult into the Church of Christ. My own

mother, raised in that restorationist tradition, never joined because she found it too severe. My dad, a Presbyterian elder, once quipped that Aunt Margaret's persistent efforts to convert him almost drove him from religion altogether. I was not hopeful as we drove to the funeral home, knowing the service would be led by my aunt's congregation, the Hillcrest Church of Christ.

What I did not anticipate was that my aunt would be blessed by a black church funeral. You see, Aunt Margaret and her family lived downtown when they first moved to Atlanta. During the Fifties, they moved into the suburbs. The move was in part job-related, but like many urban Southerners they were swept up in "the white flight" anxiety of the day. In 1964 they moved to the all-white subdivision of "Tonie Valley," where they became charter members of the Hillcrest Church of Christ.

My aunt lived in that house 45 years, even as the neighborhood around her gradually changed complexion and other white residents moved further out.

Over the decades Hillcrest changed complexion, too, from all white to majority black, with only a handful of elderly white members. This sectarian flock practices a peculiar catholicity: weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper, no instruments or choir yet every member a chorister, baptism by immersion as the sole requirement for becoming a "brother" or "sister" in the faith.

Perhaps it was providential that Margaret was re-baptized into the Church of Christ so that she would one day be given a new family -- a family unlike anything she could have imagined growing up in the segregated South. Nor would her new family have ever dreamed that they would break bread each Sunday with the likes of her.

At the funeral home, an African-American mother bragged about my aunt, beaming at her body in the open coffin: "Sister Margaret was our third grade Sunday School teacher. She taught all four of my children. She always remembered their birthdays with cards and goodie bags." Aunt Margaret was famous for the pot holders she gave as gifts -- small fabric bags filled with popcorn, now in homes all over metro-Atlanta!

During the sermon, the preacher compared Margaret to Dorcas, that early disciple who fashioned beautiful tunics to clothe the widows of her community. Margaret had the patience of Dorcas, he told us, the sure and steady hand of one who sews together pieces of fabric, who mends what has been torn and ripped and cast aside – scraps of cloth, tattered relationships, fragmented friendships. Sometimes the repair requires only a few stitches. In other cases, the mending project becomes the work of a lifetime.

For Margaret and her Hillcrest brothers and sisters, practicing forgiveness became the work of a lifetime, a mending project that evolved day after day, a stitch at a time. They didn't strategize a plan for becoming a racially diverse congregation. They weren't trying to make a statement. They simply shared life and faith together, over time, in that particular place, honoring one another as fellow disciples, created in the image of God, redeemed by Jesus Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

When Aunt Margaret died, Hillcrest gathered to sing her to heaven. And our funeral procession to the cemetery was quite a spectacle – police escorts stopped traffic on all six lanes of 285 so our entourage could cross. It was a fitting tribute, because we were redeeming those opening scenes from *Places in the Heart*, where the two funerals are thoroughly segregated by race.

I wish that estranged family I met years before could have witnessed the completion of Aunt Margaret's baptism. I wish they could belong to a church like Hillcrest, be blessed by sharing life with unlikely new brothers and sisters in Christ, and be reconciled with their own flesh and blood.

Only mercy can melt frigid hearts. Sheer grace is the only soil in which forgiveness can take root and blossom, freeing us to live into a future not bound by the brokenness of the past. "No future without forgiveness," Desmond Tutu proclaims. No future for individuals, families, tribes, nations. No hope for victims or perpetrators. A dead-end street – and that's Death with a capital D!