

THE SEVENTY-EIGHTH TIME
MATTHEW 18: 21-35

September 14, 2008
University Church of Chicago
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

Several weeks ago I outlined in a sermon on Romans 12 some of my difficulties with the Apostle Paul, and I talked about my struggles with the dichotomy he draws between faith and works, between the Law and grace. One of the aspects of this congregation's life I treasure most is that members and friends want to talk with me about my sermon during the social hour. Thus, one of our members approached me about Paul, and she said that she was somewhat confused by my statement in the sermon. It seems to her, she declared, that I am very Pauline in my theology, and she mentioned the way that I emphasize the theme of grace.

A major component of grace is forgiveness. The Bible repeatedly tells us that we ought to forgive those who have injured us. We know that. It is ingrained in our minds from the Lord's Prayer and from passages such as this one listed for this Sunday in the ecumenical lectionary. Congregations are full of people who know they should forgive, who intellectually recognize that there is some positive value in letting go of cherished hurts, but who find it well-nigh impossible to do so.

Being cheated on by a spouse or double-crossed by a business partner or being rejected by a friend whom you had come to trust are experiences that engender shame and rage, that leave the injured party feeling defective, defeated, and never quite good enough.

So when Jesus tells Peter that forgiveness cannot be calculated, that God does not keep a scorecard of rights and wrongs and neither can we, we are confronted with both the extent and nature of forgiveness. When Peter asks if we should forgive someone seven times, Jesus responds not seven, but seventy-seven times.

Don't you want to ask, "Well, then, Lord, can I forgive seventy-seven times and then on the seventy-eighth time smack that person in face?" But we know that "seventy-seven times is Jesus' way of telling Peter—and us—that forgiveness is not a commodity to be reckoned on a calculator. Not only is it limitless, but it cannot even be quantified.

To illustrate the difficulties of forgiveness, I would like to introduce you to three friends of mine. The tall, dark-haired woman is named Karla. If you ask Karla how she's doing, she almost always talks to you about how blessed she is. Karla has enjoyed both an ordinary and an extraordinary life.

Ordinary in the sense that she grew up like many others in our congregation: she was

born into a wholesome, nuclear Christian family: a mother, a father, three kids; living on the South Side of Chicago. Karla went to college, majored in communications, then earned an M.B.A. Got married, later divorced, centered her life on her career, her extended family and her friends. Like others you know, she dropped out of church in the midst of her attainments of career and success. But a couple of years ago, she was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, and she began to examine what her life is about, what all the success and blessings really mean. “Did I attain this on my own? Or are these gifts from God—the way I was taught in that Lutheran Sunday School in the sixties? If they are gifts from God, what am I to do with them? They don’t belong to me. God gave them to me for a purpose—but what’s the purpose?”

Which leads us to consider the extraordinary aspect of Karla’s life. She’s an amazingly talented woman who has come as close to shattering the glass ceiling as one could imagine in today’s patriarchal business climate. She has friends, family, and leisure. She takes vacations, drinks the best wines, has a nicely decorated condo. But she knows there’s something more, something deeper, something missing without God, without the church. To many of her friends, such longing in itself is extraordinary. For Karla, God keeps prodding her about her blessings.

Karla and I have talked a lot about the difference between attainment and grace. I keep trying to get her to understand that it is God who gives the blessing. God does not exhort us to be this or that, like merciful or poor in spirit or persecuted or meek. Jesus never says, “You ought to be meek” or “You ought to be humble.” God pronounces his blessing and the language is performative. The blessing is conferred in the saying of it.

Karla recently said, “My religion was like the grandfather clock in my mother’s front hallway. That clock has been in our family for generations. It’s a family heirloom, and everyone likes to have it around. But nobody notices that the clock hasn’t kept time for well over 80 years.

“We wouldn’t think of getting rid of that clock. My mother polishes and dusts it regularly. It has a place of honor in her house. But the clock no longer functions. It doesn’t tell time and it doesn’t regulate our lives.

“That’s what my religion was like until I began to put my blessings into perspective and to see that Christianity is not about ‘oughts’ and ‘shoulds,’ but about freedom to live and give and share what God has given. That’s when I began to awaken from the dead sleep of selfishness. I’m still rubbing my eyes and coming out of twenty-five years of slumber, but I’m much more awake.”

Sitting next to Karla is my friend Ted. If you want to know where to find the latest best restaurant in Chicago, don’t thumb through Chicago magazine or the Friday food section of the Trib or consult the Hungry Hound on Channel 7. Ask Ted. If you want to know where the best Super Bowl party will be celebrated on that most important day in

American culture, call Ted. But you will need to see him right after church because he's going to attend at least four of them—one for each quarter. Ted admits, "I'm a sensual person. I have a lot of trouble with this parable about the unforgiving servant. O.K., the guy was a heartless ogre. He had been forgiven so generously by the king and then acted so ruthlessly toward his fellow servant. But what does it mean when Matthew has Jesus say, 'My heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart'?"

"Does that mean that if I do not forgive those who injure me, God will withhold forgiveness? Is divine forgiveness conditioned on my letting go of grudges and hurts?"

"Oh, I go to church and I'm active in many of its activities and I try to live a Christian life, but I think Jesus is too harsh in the conclusion to the parable. And yet—he also emphasizes God's grace in some wonderful ways. I believe Jesus is holding up an ideal, so high and demanding that we have to depend on grace. That's what the faith is all about anyway, Pastor. You're the one who keeps harping on grace week after week."

And that's where Ted and I have some really wonderful theological arguments. I love to quote one of my favorite theologians, that imperious German from Lincoln, Illinois, a graduate of Elmhurst College named Reinhold Niebuhr. Sensuality is a word that easily deceives us because we identify it exclusively with sexuality, lust and the love of physical pleasure. But for Niebuhr, sensuality is about the ways we try to escape anxiety. We must distinguish between the manner or means through which anxiety is escaped and the act of escaping.

Sensuality is not just about sexual license, gluttony, extravagance, drunkenness and lust, among others. Sensuality has two primary forms: the sensuality of idolatry and the sensuality of nothingness.

Ted and I talk a good deal about its implications for our anxiety. One way the anxious self denies its freedom is by deifying or subjugating itself to some "other," whether that other be an ideology or a person or a political movement or an institution. The victim of idolatry escapes his or her anxiety by accepting the wishes and dictates of someone or something that is conceived to be more powerful, wiser or more real than oneself.

Niebuhr, who was thoroughly German (his father led a German-speaking congregation in central Illinois and so did he, later, in Detroit) found this kind of idolatrous sin exemplified in his day by Nazi Germany, to which he made a trip in 1935, and its veneration of the Fuhrer and the motherland. But any mass movement to which we give ourselves, by which we are seduced so that we can reduce our anxiety and not have to think is equally idolatrous for us. The women's movement has helped awaken Ted to some implications here. His girlfriend Alice reminds him that she's not willing to submerge her life in his, give up her own beliefs and ideals and values in order to get a husband. She labels that the "sin of hiding," and she's seen too many of her friends d

Go to a party in Hyde Park this week or attend one of those gatherings where you have to wear a “howdy badge,” a name tag. You will meet someone you don’t know, and that person will immediately ask you two questions: “What’s your name?” and “What do you do?” When someone asks me “What do you do?” I answer, “About what?” Because, you see, if they discover that I am a pastor, they immediately want to tell me why they no longer go to church or what is wrong with organized religion or how they are a good person even though they don’t believe in God.

But more importantly, I am not defined by what I do, by my job or status or profession. God, according to Matthew, defines us not according to what we own or how many degrees we have or our attainments, but by the way we forgive.

When I am on an airplane, I always try to get an aisle seat. I do not like to be confined. But sitting on the aisle has its hazards. After the guy next to you has stumbled over you several times on a flight in order to get to the restroom or to get something from the flight attendant, you become more than seat mates. He soon asks the inevitable question, “What do you do?” To which I reply, “I sell fire insurance.” Which, when you think about it, is what I do.

But when he presses about what kind of insurance and I have to confess that I am a minister of the Gospel, then he wants to tell me about his own spiritual quest. Remember, the word “repent” means “to turn around, to take a new path.” That’s what my friend is looking for: a new path, a new way of life.

The third seeking Christian I introduce you to is named Marcia. In many ways, Marcia is the antithesis of Ted and Karla. They came back to the church after living a long time in spiritual deserts. Marcia has left the church. Well, she doesn’t think she has because she comes to worship around Christmastime and during the last days of Lent—although never on Christmas or Easter. “I’m not going to be one of those ‘High Holy Days’ people,” she avers.

Marcia has grown disillusioned with religion and her former idealism has been replayed by cynicism. She has taken flight not to a false god but to what Niebuhr called “Nothingness.” Several studies have revealed that some people who were once active in the church and then dropped out become, like Marcia, bored and indifferent. That is, when you ask them how they feel about organized religion in contrast to their former involvement and enthusiasm, they say, “Oh, I’m just bored by it now. I don’t know why I ever got so caught up in it.”

This passion to forget, to overwhelm anxiety, to close off the still small voice of conscience, to live perfectly free of inhibitions and taboos, creates a market for people like Marcia. Drugs, entertainment, sex, escape—all those are readily available. That old movie, “Lost Weekend,” has entered our vocabulary for good reason: it accurately describes and articulates the deepest desires of the sensuality of nothingness. If you ask a

huge number of Hyde Parkers tomorrow (Monday) what they did over the weekend, they will respond with words and stories that describe in one way or another an abyss of meaninglessness.

But here's the good news. The Prince of Peace who gives us God's inimitable grace understands the powerful drives in our human hearts. He is one of us. He strongly criticizes anyone who seeks to dominate someone else, anybody who strives for title and status at the expense of "the little ones." But he speaks blessing upon peacemakers and those who sacrifice and those who work for a community of equals in church and society.

One of the struggling Christians whose novels reveal the depth of the human heart was Fyodor Dostoevsky. He struggled with alcohol and gambling addictions, with his alienation from the church and the evils revealed in human existence. Dostoevsky didn't like museums and art galleries, but one day he and his wife Anna went to the Museum of Art in Basel, Switzerland to see a painting, "Christ Taken Down from the Cross," by Hans Holbein the Younger. He had heard about the picture and what he had heard had greatly impressed him.

Anna described in her diary Fyodor's frightened expression when he saw the painting, her fear that he was going to suffer an epileptic seizure. She led him to another room and made him sit down on a bench. Christ is pictured in such vividness by Holbein. He is depicted with an emaciated body, the bones and ribs showing, his hands and feet pierced, swollen and very blue. His face is agonized and his eyes are half open. His nose, mouth and chin have turned blue. Anna's reaction was revulsion.

But Fyodor saw Christ being taken down from the cross as a revelation. For the first time he realized that Jesus was a human being just like other people and that at the Incarnation, God truly had become one of us. "Beauty," he makes Dmitri Karamazov say, "is not only a terrible thing, it is also a mysterious thing. There God and the Devil strive for mastery, and the battleground is the heart of men and women."

When God's own Son pronounces blessings of peace and humility and mercy on us, his followers, the battle's outcome is guaranteed. We live by God's grace and in response we are called—compelled—to a life of forgiveness and graciousness.