

## Forgiveness

Daniel Van Ness  
Good Friday Meditation  
Truro Episcopal Church  
March 29,2002

Mark 11:12-14; 20-25

I work for the International Centre for Justice and Reconciliation, a program of an organization call Prison Fellowship International. PFI is an association of 95 national Prison Fellowships around the world, each called to help the church minister to prisoners, ex-prisoners, their victims and their families, and to promote a biblical understanding of justice in the criminal justice systems of the world.

Every few years we gather representatives from each country for a time of encouragement, training, prayer and business discussions. At the meeting last year I was responsible for leading a day-long seminar on restorative justice – justice that seeks to restore community peace by holding offenders accountable for addressing the harm they have caused victims. An excellent example of restorative justice is found in Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus, the corrupt tax collector whose victims – the people of Jericho – had been so harmed by his corrupt practices that they would not let him through to see Jesus. So, he climbed a Sycamore-fig tree to watch as Jesus passed by. But instead, Jesus stopped, had Zacchaeus come down the tree, and had an encounter that led this offender to confess what he had done and promise to pay restitution (4x whatever I’ve stolen), promise to go beyond that (give half my goods to the poor). That is restorative justice.

Last year’s meeting was held in South Africa. I traveled there on September 18th, one week after the terrorist attacks on the United States. As my plane circled the airport in Johannesburg, I struggled with how to lead the seminar. That topic seemed to be a reasonably easy one when we scheduled it a year ago. But that was before the terrorist attacks. Could the principles and values of restorative justice guide our thinking and response to crime of that scale?

I thought about the nation I would be visiting – South Africa – a country that had been forced to address the great injustice of apartheid, and the thousands of injustices committed on both sides before apartheid was abandoned. I remembered that Desmond Tutu had spoken of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as an attempt to apply restorative justice. I thought about the book he wrote (and that I had recently read) about his work as chairman of the TRC. The title of his book was “No Future Without Forgiveness.”

Forgiveness! I had not thought once about forgiveness after the attacks. And I certainly hadn’t heard the word forgiveness mentioned on the news or in the statements of political or religious leaders in America. There is no way we

could talk about forgiveness. It would look soft; it would seem insensitive to the damage and fear brought by the terror; it would appear to be blind to the evil behind those acts.

As the plane descended, I kept thinking: Jesus talked about forgiving brothers and sisters, and people who repent (even if they keep doing it over and over). He forgave the people responsible for his death. Did he ever talk about forgiving enemies? Did he ever *explicitly* say, "Forgive your enemies"? Nothing came to mind. But that didn't help much, because the verb he used in telling us how to treat our enemies was "love."

Love! Forgiveness at least acknowledges an injustice, a wrong. Love looks beyond that act and focuses on its real interest, the beloved person. If I couldn't imagine talking about forgiveness in a meaningful way, I was completely in the dark about what we could say about love. And yet, how could I talk about what the Bible says about crime and justice and ignore those critical issues?

Even as I thought about that, I realized that my real problem was not what I should *teach*. It was what I was going to *do personally* about forgiveness and love. The commands of Christ are clear. Love your enemies. Forgive so that your Father will forgive you.

The Gospel writer John tells us that "the thief comes to steal, to kill and to destroy." That is what the terrorists had done to most of us. In addition to the direct damage they did to the lives and families of over 3000 people, they had also stolen, killed and destroyed something from the people of the United States – our sense of safety and security.

The victims of the terrorist attacks were not just those who died and their friends and relatives. These attacks were direct assaults on the American people as a whole, and in a larger sense on Western civilization. They were intended to be.

What does it mean to love our enemies and forgive those who wrong us when we are faced with this kind of offense? I did not know.

Two days later, at the lunch break during the seminar on restorative justice, I met with Bishop John Rucyahana of Rwanda, an Anglican bishop, and the head of Prison Fellowship in his country. Beginning in early 1994, between 700,000 and 1,000,000 Rwandans were killed in a wave of genocide that swept through that nation. Most of these deaths took place in a 100 day period, although the killing continued in some parts of the country until 1997. The victims were primarily members of the Tutsi tribe; most of the offenders were Hutu.

Nearly 120,000 people are now held in Rwandan prisons; most of them have been locked up for 5-7 years awaiting trial for genocide-related crimes. Only a handful of defendants have been tried in the seven years since the genocide, either in Rwandan courts or the special UN Tribunal set up for that purpose. Because the Tutsis made up most of the professional class in Rwanda, few judges or lawyers survived.

The deplorable conditions in Rwanda's jails and prisons have given rise to increasing international criticism, as has the lengthy delay in bringing those

accused of genocide to trial. Recognizing the injustice of indefinite pre-trial detention, the government has decided on an ambitious but risky plan to create 10,000 community courts based on an indigenous process known as *acaca*.

These local courts will handle the vast majority of those charged with genocide – all but the masterminds. Their processes will be informal, based on the customary practices, and the courts will be authorized to impose sentences of imprisonment as well as community-based sanctions such as restitution and community service. Gacacas are due to begin in two months, which means that prisoners could start re-entering the community after June of this year.

Bishop Rucyahana told me of growing concern in Rwanda that releasing large numbers of prisoners could lead to renewed violence. He asked whether our Centre could help them develop a programme that would prepare prisoners and their families, victims, and communities prepare for release. He needed something that can be rolled out across the country fast.

He was interested in Sycamore Tree, a programme we created that brings prisoners and unrelated victims together over a period of weeks to discuss what the Bible says about confession, forgiveness, repentance, reconciliation and restitution. PF Rwanda arranges an average of five victim-offender reconciliation meetings each week for prisoners who have converted to Christ and are now willing to confess their crimes. He was interested in a programme that would lead many more prisoners through this process.

Could we work together to design a course for PF Rwanda volunteers to offer in prisons and communities? Could it be ready in time for a volunteer training event in just a few months? It has become urgent that confession and forgiveness be discussed in Rwanda, and there is hardly enough time left. So much national and international attention has been focused on attempts to care for survivors and to help the country recover. That work has made a difference, but those needs are still enormous. Could this genocide-wracked country have talked earlier about forgiveness and love of enemies?

When is it time to forgive?

Three months later I was in Rwanda, working with Bishop John and others with Prison Fellowship to piece together what we have come to call the Umuvumu Tree Project. The Umuvumu tree is a kind of fig tree, and is probably the one that Zacchaeus would have climbed if the meeting with Jesus had happened in Rwanda.

I visited genocide sites, where tens of thousands of people were killed in a few short days, killed by their Hutu neighbors, wielding machetes. Many of these sites are at churches, to which the Tutsis fled for sanctuary. In too many cases, it was the pastors of the churches who then organized the killing of their parishioners.

I visited prisons where those accused of genocide are held in unbelievable conditions. One of the small prisons holds 7000 men in an area about the size of Truro's parking lot. There are a total of 20 toilets for those men, and the sewage seeps into an open sewer in the middle of the prison. Prisoners are packed into canvas tents. They have been there for years. They have grievances against

the government for their treatment, with good reason. They too will need to forgive.

As I met with Bishop John, I spoke of the insight of the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, who suffered during the Serb-Croat fighting in the former Yugoslavia. He looked for a theology that could lead to peace, and in doing that had to discard liberation theology, because both sides felt oppressed. He found fresh insight in the story of the Prodigal Son, when the Father ran to meet his boy and threw his arms around him in embrace. Embrace or exclusion – those are the choices that we must make concerning those who have harmed us, Volf has written.

Embrace or exclusion. The choice would be easy if it were not for the fact that God calls us to embrace. It is part of the offence of the Gospel; it is the flip side of the Good News that God has embraced us. Now go embrace your enemies.

Bishop John listened, and then said that this is a good insight, but it will not work for Rwanda. For the parable of the Prodigal Son describes what the Father does once the Son has stopped his offending behavior and decided to return. The embrace comes when the son returns home. The harm has been finished.

Is that the time for us to forgive? When things have settled down? If so, said Bishop John, there is no hope for Rwanda, because the harm continues, even to today. He described how one Sunday he preached on forgiveness and realized that God's word for Rwanda had been given through the lips of his Son as he died on the cross. When Jesus forgave it was not after his enemies had done their worst, it was while they were still carrying out, with fiendish glee, their crime.

"That we can understand," said Bishop John. "Even now we are in peril. The time to forgive is now."

I began with the curious story of Jesus cursing the fig tree because it did not have fruit. But it wasn't supposed to have fruit – we are told clearly that it was not the season for figs. When the disciples asked Jesus to explain, he made some now familiar comments about how little faith this sort of thing requires, urges them to pray, and then says (vs. 25) that if they hold anything against another person, they should forgive that person so that God will forgive them.

I suspect that there is no good season for forgiveness, no time in which it comes easily. The season of forgiveness surely cannot be while the crime or wrong is taking place. It is foolish to expect forgiveness at that time. As foolish as expecting figs to grow out of season.

When is it time to forgive? Let me suggest that we need to forgive when Jesus comes looking for forgiveness. In other words, we don't forgive on our own schedule. We forgive even when we don't feel like it. We forgive even when the time doesn't seem right.

Father, forgive Osama bin Laden and the men who support his terrorist network. I forgive them of what they have done to me. I chose to love them,

help me to do that. I pray that you would reach them through your grace and mercy to bring them to yourself so that one day they and I and all your children may rejoice with you in your kingdom. Amen.