

Action and Attitude Have Consequences

Midweek Lenten Service

Text: Luke 19:42

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

This Lenten season we are taking our cue from a true story and listening to that story in relationship to the Gospel, and in the context or in relationship to the matter of the forgiveness of sins or the idea of forgiveness. I find that this is a subject about which it seems I've preached all my life, this matter of forgiveness, and yet I don't think I've ever thought about it quite so thoroughly or deeply as I have in getting ready for these meditations. Forgiveness is the common fare of our Christian tradition, it is the offer of the Gospel; it is central to everything we are and everything we do, and yet I wonder how often we have really reflected on forgiveness.

Last week, "Forgiveness: Possible? Moral?" And for those of you who were here, you know that I am basing these meditations, or at least taking off from the story by Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, in which he records his experience during the Holocaust when he was bounced from one concentration camp to another, barely escaping death a dozen times, having lost 89 of his own relatives to the gas furnaces. Wiesenthal, on one occasion, in a work detail in a makeshift hospital, was pulled aside by a nurse and brought to the bedside of a dying SS officer who poured out his awful tale of the atrocities that he had perpetrated, and in his dying hours, looked to this Jew to offer him forgiveness on behalf of the Jewish people for all of the horror and the hell of which he had been a part, and as you remember, Wiesenthal was paralyzed as he sat by the bedside listening to this terrible, terrible tale. After hearing most of it, Wiesenthal writes,

... I stood up ready to leave but he pleaded with me: "Please stay. I must tell you the rest."

I really do not know what kept me. But there was something in his voice that prevented me from obeying my instinct to end the interview. Perhaps I wanted to hear from his own mouth, in his own words, the full horror of the Nazis' inhumanity.

When we were told that everything was ready, we went back a few yards, and then received the command to remove safety pins from the hand grenades and throw them through the windows of the house (into which they had herded two to three hundred Jews with cans of gasoline). Detonations followed, one after another. ... My God!"

Now he was silent, and he raised himself slightly from his bed: his whole body was shivering.

But he continued: "We heard screams and saw the flames eat their way from floor to floor... We had our rifles ready to shoot down anyone who tried to escape from the blazing hell..."

"The screams from the house were horrible. Dense smoke poured out and choked us..."

His hand felt damp. He was so shattered by his recollection that he broke into a sweat and I loosened my hand from his grip. But at once he groped for it again and held it tight.

"Please, please," he stammered, "don't go away. I have more to say."

I no longer had any doubts as to the ending. I saw that he was summoning his strength for one last effort to tell me the rest of the story to its bitter end.

"... Behind the windows of the second floor I saw a man with a small child in his arms. His clothes were alight. By his side stood a woman, doubtless the mother of the child. With his free hand, the man covered the child's eyes ... then he jumped into the street. Seconds later the mother followed. Then from the other window fell burning bodies ... We shot... O God!"

The dying man held his hand in front of his bandaged eyes as if he wanted to banish the picture from his mind.

"I don't know how many tried to jump out of the windows, but that one family I shall never forget - least of all the child. It had black hair and dark eyes..."

He fell silent, completely exhausted.

The child with the dark eyes that he had described reminded me of Eli, a boy from the Lemberg ghetto, six years old with large, questioning eyes - eyes that could not understand - accusing eyes - eyes that one never forgets.

The Sunflower, S. Wiesenthal, 41-43

Paralyzed, as it were, knowing that this man was begging for some word of forgiveness, pity, Wiesenthal rose and left the room without a word, and his account ends with the request that we would put ourselves in his place and answer the question: *What would I have done?*

Well, that, again, is the story that triggered my thinking about this thing, and the last half of this little book has about twenty responses from philosophers, moralists, rabbis, priests, every one very cautious, quite unwilling to say to Wiesenthal, "Yes, you should have given forgiveness," or "No, you did right in not saying a word." Everyone very cautious because who dares make a judgment in such extreme circumstances? What would I have done? What would you have done?

Wiesenthal doesn't claim to answer it; he leaves us with that awful question, and those who responded recognized the severity and the importance of the question. One or two say, "I would have killed the man on the spot." One or two are sure he should have given a word of forgiveness. And in between, all of the rest waffle to and fro.

So, what would you have done? What would I have done?

I noted last week that one thing that I have learned from the Jewish tradition is that it is a strong teaching in the Jewish tradition that I cannot forgive you for what you've done to another. The victim, alone, can grant forgiveness. And I've also come to see how easy it is for us to deal in "cheap grace," not taking radical evil seriously, or taking seriously enough the damage and the injury done to the victim, and therefore letting it just brush off. There's also that tendency in all of us, I think, to want to be done with these awful things, simply to pass them over in silence and avoidance, not really wrestling with the depth of the issue. And yet, I concluded with the fact that it would be a bleak, bleak world, indeed, if there were no forgiveness, and that forgiveness we saw from Psalm 130 is rooted in God. "O Lord, if Thou shouldst mark iniquity, who could stand? But with Thee there is forgiveness."

Tonight I want to say, forgiveness, yes, but not the removal of the consequences of our actions and our attitudes. Forgiveness does not mean that I escape clean of the consequences of my actions. Forgiveness doesn't really have anything to do with the eradication of the consequences. The consequences will be reaped. Our actions and our attitudes have consequences, and history itself is the judgment of history, and we do reap what we sow. I'm thinking of the story in the Gospel of Jesus confronting Jerusalem. "How oft would I have gathered thee as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but ye would not." That kind of cry or plea on the part of God can be placed again and again throughout the biblical story. "How often would I, but ye would not?" And, consequently, we reap the consequences. It has always been true; it always will be true. Jesus said, "You will not see me again until you cry, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,'" and on that triumphal entry into the city, when the children were praising him, he came

to the crest of Olivet and wept over that city, a city that he loved and for whom he had all of the hopes of Israel's past, a city that he knew would be doomed because he said, "You know not the day of your visitation. If only you had known the things that make for peace."

Isn't it true again and again? Jerusalem is just a paradigm of the human experience, whether it be the secular governments of the world, or whether it be the institutions, the church, for example. We plod on our way with blindness and stubbornness and obstreperousness in spite of all of the signs to the contrary, and we reap the reward.

It was the cantankerousness of the human heart and mind that disallowed the possibility of the Jesus movement and the faith of Israel to be one. It was the obstinacy and that mind set in concrete in the 16th century that rent the body of Christ into Catholic and Protestant, and it has continued to be so ever since, in the Church and in the world. Governments, leaders, the Saddam Husseins and the Malosivecs and God knows who else who will not, for whatever reason – pride of place or position or prestige.– who will push it to the limit until there is hell to pay. Actions and attitudes have their consequences.

I have in my hand a rather strange and interesting magazine, a thoughtful magazine called the *Utne Reader*. It just came and it just happens to be on forgiveness. There are several very fascinating articles on the very thing we're wrestling with here this Lenten season. A David Gelernter, for example, says,

What do murderers deserve? A Texas woman, Karla Faye Tucker, (remember her?) murdered two people with a pickax, was said to have repented in prison and was put to death. A Montana man, Theodore Kaczynski, murdered three people with mail bombs, did not repent, and struck a bargain with the Justice Department: He pleaded guilty and will not be executed. (He also attempted to murder others and succeeded in wounding some, myself included.) Why did we execute the penitent and spare the impenitent? However we answer this question, we surely have a duty to ask it.

And he goes on wrestling with that knotty question of capital punishment. Why do we murder the murderer? Should we take the life of one who has taken a life?

One of the writers of the *Utne Reader*, Jeremiah Creedon, in an article entitled, "To Hell and Back," talks about the necessity of breaking the cycle of violence in the world. Professor Martha Minow of Harvard, in her book interestingly titled, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, just the kinds of things we're thinking about here, points out the necessity of reconciliation if we are to have a humane world.

But, how close lie vengeance and justice, and at what point is the execution of the law more harmful than moving beyond in an attempt at reconciliation? For

example, as it's going on in South Africa, with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was chaired by Bishop Desmond Tutu, in which the South African perpetrators of violence in the past were offered immunity if they would come and tell their story. Is there something more healthy about having the truth being told without the infliction of the penalty? In order to have the truth stated, is it better for us to come to an awareness, victim and victimizer, of the truth? Can there then be reconciliation and healing?

You see, I'm just like Wiesenthal; I'm not giving you answers. I'm asking you questions, because there aren't easy answers. But God knows that it is true that the cycle of violence in the world must be broken.

Jesus knew this. Some say that Judas betrayed him in order to push him, to show his hand, to lead the zealots, to overthrow the Roman oppressor. Jesus' way was not the way of violence, but it was violence whose consequences were ultimately reaped. The violence of Rome, the violent response of the Jew, the violent response of Rome and the absolute devastation of the city.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How oft would I, but you would not."

So, actions and attitudes have their consequences, and a society desperately needs to wrestle with the question of how justice can be done without the escalation of violence, and it's very complex.

I would leave you with a picture of God, because finally we have to go back there. It is finally, I believe, the nature of God as we understand God that will determine how we live.

If I could only pick out half a dozen passages of the scripture to take with me on a desert island, Hosea 11 would be one passage. The tenderness of God Who rescues his child from Egypt's slavery and takes the child and nurtures the child Israel and brings the child to his cheek and the child turns away, and so, the very natural kind of response now is attributed to God: Destruction will come in the wake of your disobedience and your turning away from me. And then, in the midst of the meting out of the sentence, those words, "But how can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I give you up? I grow warm within, my compassions surge forth. How can I give you up? I will not give you up. Because I am God and not human."

Thank God, God is that way, for God knows that we go blindly, stupidly on our way with actions and attitudes that continue to create all of the devastation and the brokenness in human relationships, personal relationships, national affairs, and there are actions and attitudes that will bear consequences. But, that's not the last word. The last word is a God whose compassion will disallow God doing what God knows ought to be done, and therefore, going against every reasonable response, saying "I will not, I will not let you go." Thank God.

References:

The Utne Reader: alternative coverage of politics, culture, and new ideas
(Founded in 1984 by Eric Utne, purchased in 2006 by Ogden Publications)

Simon Wiesenthal. *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. Schocken; revised expanded edition, 1998.