

Forgiveness: Possible? Moral?

Midweek Lenten Worship

Text: Luke 7:36-50

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The theme stated in the bulletin, "Forgiveness: Possible? Moral?" is really the theme of the evening, but there is an overall theme for this Lenten series which I failed to get printed. It's called "A True Story: The Gospel and Forgiveness," for I want us to think on these Lenten meditations about the possibility of forgiveness, the nature of forgiveness, and the qualities of forgiveness, and what it is that we understand about forgiveness.

The story is a story called *The Sunflower*, by Simon Wiesenthal. It is recorded in this little book, which I was given sometime within the course of the last year. His name may be familiar to you; he is the Jew who has founded a center located in Vienna with a branch in Los Angeles. It is a documentation center and Simon Wiesenthal is one who survived the concentration camps and has given himself to the pursuit of all of those Nazi war criminals who have managed to escape punishment. He has given his whole life to their pursuit; he has dogged their steps. Not so many years ago he was able to track down Adolph Eichmann, you may remember. Some call him a dangerous fanatic, and yet, Simon Wiesenthal is a man who, having gone through what he went through, is convinced that the Holocaust, that story, must be told. He wrote in *The New York Times* that the schools will be silent, the churches will wipe out the Holocaust with forgiveness, and parents will be in denial trying to evade and avoid the raw terror of what happened fifty some years ago. *The Sunflower* is his story.

Simon Wiesenthal lost 89 of his relatives; he saw his aged mother crammed into a boxcar on her way to the death camp. His wife's mother was shot in the staircase of her own home. He, himself, miraculously escaped death a dozen times. He is a man who has two engineering degrees, and was a successful architect living in Poland, a land where there had been a long history of anti-Semitism. He finally was arrested in October of 1943. He made his way through various camps for the next nearly two years, finally to be liberated by the American troops in May of 1945. He tells his story in *The Sunflower*.

I won't go into the sunflower symbolism; can't possibly give you a sense of this story in a few moments this evening, but the heart of the story is his recounting of an encounter with a dying Nazi SS officer. He was a prisoner in a death camp; he was in a detail that was dispatched to a makeshift hospital and, arriving there, a nurse led him into the room of this dying SS officer whose head was totally bandaged and who was obviously in his last moments, and the SS officer poured out his story to Simon Wiesenthal. This is a young German SS officer, 22 years old, knowing that he is about to die, but recounting the horrors of what he had done, the most vivid instance that of herding two to three hundred Jewish people in the village into a three-story house in which they had to carry cans of gasoline into which were lobbed grenades with the obvious result - explosions and fire, and with the SS officers around the house with their machine guns at the ready to gun down anyone who would try to jump or escape in any way. This SS officer saw a father with a little child in his arms, dark hair and dark eyes. The father put his hand over the child's eyes and they leaped from the second story window, followed by the mother, and whether or not they died on impact or were dead because of the machine gun, he doesn't know, and he went on to describe other horrors of which he was a part, but that particular scene he could not erase from his mind.

Wiesenthal, near death himself in the death camp and his work detail, sat frozen on the SS officer's bed. He wanted to run, but the officer held him firmly and said that Wiesenthal had to listen to it all. And then the SS officer, after completing his tale, said,

"When I was still a boy I believed with my mind and soul in God and in the commandments of the Church. Then everything was easier. If I still had that faith, I am sure death would not be so hard.

"I cannot die ... without coming clean. This must be my confession, but what sort of confession is this? A letter without an answer ..."

No doubt he was referring to my silence. But what could I say? Here was a dying man - a murderer who did not want to be a murderer, but who had been made into a murderer by a murderous ideology. He was confessing his crime to a man who perhaps tomorrow must die at the hands of these same murderers. In his confession there was true repentance, even though he did not admit it in so many words. Nor was it necessary, for the way he spoke and the fact that he spoke to *me* was a proof of his repentance...

He sat up and put his hands together as if to pray.

"I want to die in peace, and so I need ..."

I saw that he could not get the words past his lips, but I was in no mood to help him. I kept silent.

I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death time and again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him, only I didn't know whether there were any Jews left...

I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer, I cannot die in peace."

Now there was an uncanny silence in the room. I looked through the window. The front of the buildings opposite was flooded with sunlight. The sun was high in the heavens. There was only a small triangular shadow in the courtyard.

What a contrast between the glorious sunshine outside and the shadow of this bestial age here in the death chamber. Here lay a man in bed who wished to die in peace, but he could not because the memory of his terrible crime gave him no rest. And by him sat a man also doomed to die - but who did not want to die because he yearned to see the end of all the horror that blighted the world.

Two men who had never known each other had been brought together by a few hours by fate. One asks the other for help. But the other was himself helpless and able to do nothing for him.

I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands... At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room.

The account is relatively brief, only ninety-nine pages. These are the last couple of paragraphs that Wiesenthal writes:

Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong? This is a profound moral question that challenges the conscience of the reader of this episode just as much as it once challenged my heart and my mind. There are those who can appreciate my dilemma and so endorse my attitude. And there are others who will be ready to condemn me for refusing to ease the last moments of a repentant murderer.

The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of forgiveness. Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of. But, forgiveness is an act of volition and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision.

You who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can mentally change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question, "What would I have done?"

The last half of the book is a series of brief responses from some twenty philosophers, theologians, priests, rabbis, giving the response to his question,

"What would you have done?" and the book ends without an answer, it remains a question. It's a question that I would like to leave with you tonight. It's a question that I would like to have us continue to reflect on in this Lenten season.

A dying man in anguish pitifully asks forgiveness from another human being, in this case, a Jew on behalf of the Jews. He listens to the whole story, but then he leaves in silence. What would you have done?

All of the respondents, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, are very subdued in their response because we are so far from that situation that I don't think there is anybody that would presume to put themselves in his place and answer for him. I don't think that it is possible for us to begin to take in the horror of those years. Nonetheless, a step removed from the concrete situation in which Wiesenthal found himself, the moral question is there and that's why I raise the question tonight. Forgiveness: Is it possible? Is it moral?

I have learned in the Jewish tradition that there is a very strong tradition that no one can forgive another for a crime against a third person. I could not forgive you for something you did to another, that it is only the person sinned against that can offer forgiveness. And, as I have reflected on that particular thing, I'm also aware that in the Christian tradition and in a church like Christ Community which has been marked by grace, there is always the danger of "cheap grace."

Sometime in the last year or so there was one of these awful school shootings, I think in Arkansas, and the newspaper showed signs of neighbors and young people having the name of the young man that perpetrated that tragedy saying, whatever his name was, "(Jim), we forgive you." There is a Jewish commentator, writer, journalist, Dennis Prager, who wrote a very sharp article on the dummied down of Christianity, saying that such offering of forgiveness before there was any admission of guilt or any indication of repentance was the dummied down of Christianity and an abuse. That's "cheap grace."

The attitude of "Oh, it doesn't matter," thinking now not about that Holocaust situation, but thinking more in general, those who say something doesn't really matter, offering easy absolution are not dealing with the reality of evil and the necessity of repentance and reformation in human life. Forgiveness can be bandied about easily if we don't take seriously the extent to which we injure one another. Forgiveness ought not to come easily.

And yet, forgiveness is rooted in our image of God, our sense of God. Forgiveness was imaged in the God of Israel. The Psalmist said, "Oh, Lord, if you should mark iniquity, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness." And that forgiveness of the God of Israel was reflected in the ministry of Jesus. The woman who came to him off the street, a woman of the night, into the Pharisee's house, to whom he extends forgiveness, seeing in the love of her life a kind of human transformation that is affected by the touch of grace.

My favorite novel, drama, musical, "*Les Miserables*," has Jean Valjean fleeing the police inspector, taking refuge in the convent, robbing in the middle of the night the silver of the priest, only to be apprehended and brought back to the priest by the gendarmes, and the priest saying, "I gave it to him." And then looking Jean Valjean in the eye, saying, "I exorcize the evil of your heart. Go out a new man." And the story is of the transformation of the human being.

Forgiveness. What darkness there would be if, when one comes to that point of self-knowledge and the honest confronting of oneself and lays it bare, that one would meet only with silence. Doesn't it give you a chill to think of that? Not in any sense to take away from Wiesenthal or to judge him, and to recognize that perhaps he had no right to offer forgiveness to the SS officer for crimes against those who had suffered. Nonetheless, as one commentator suggested, maybe just some word of recognition and understanding short of the offer of absolution. And yet, as we will think in these Lenten weeks, it is God who forgives, but that remains abstract until we forgive one another, not lightly, not nonchalantly, but seriously in the light of honest repentance which is a change of mind and a raising of consciousness or a coming to oneself. Then the Gospel says that for such a one there is forgiveness, forgiveness because that's the way God is, ultimately, ultimately, full of grace.

References:

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