

Brite Ministers' Week – Wells Sermons
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Table Etiquette

Genesis 18:1-8 and I Corinthians 11:27-29

Luke 23:24

I recently read *The Shack* – whose author will be here in a couple of days. As I made my way through the pages, it started to dawn on me that the theology of the narrative was starting to bend inexorably toward the likelihood that before this story was over, some major forgiveness was going to be demanded.

I further became aware that I did not want to go there.

Reading *The Shack* posed a challenge.

An important one because – forgiveness is pretty close to the center of our faith. Jesus' near last words— from the cross – “Father, forgive them,” ring through the centuries as a call for us to likewise forgive – even in the most unforgiveable circumstances.

Hard for me to imagine, but it turns out people actually do this.

I think of the Amish community, whose school became a madman's shooting gallery in a random and horrible killing spree. What did those faithful Amish people do upon the senseless deaths of their children? They went to the family members of the shooter to say that they forgave him.

How do people do that???

Well, for one thing, the costs of not forgiving are great.

A parishioner once told me that after losing her husband way too young, she needed to forgive God. But she grew angry and bitter. One day a friend told her, “You've got to get rid of that anger. Bitterness like that is acid, and acid destroys from within the container that carries it.”

But it's not easy.

Part of my recent sabbatical, as I said last night, included a stay in Lebanon, a place known to people my age as the location of a protracted civil war that was on our nightly news for quite awhile.

I went there because today Lebanon is a place of fascinating religious and cultural diversity, including a flourishing Christian community, wonder-of-the-world-worthy natural and historical sites, and a vibrant night life (um . . .so I am told . . .)

But in Lebanon there is a lot to forgive.

And a lot of evidence of the cost when you don't. With Lebanon – as with its neighbors to the south, Israel and the West Bank and Gaza – there have been too many episodes of war and massacre and outrage going back too many years, one nation or clan against another – or, sadly, one religion! – against another.

Depending on who's recounting the history, one side's “senseless massacre” is the other side's “righteous” revenge. Lack of forgiveness from one event –

understandable lack of forgiveness – leads to the next horror. To the inability to find compromise. To the impasse we know in today’s Middle East.

Lebanon – where I focused my time – is also a beautiful country full of irrepressible people. But the US State Department is not wild about US citizens visiting there. Everybody’s pretty sure there’s still another violent chapter of revenge yet to be written.

In the preface to the book *Killing Mr. Lebanon*, about the 2005 assassination of a former Prime Minister of Lebanon, the author, Nicholas Blanford, says: “. . . it was a compelling tale to relate, one which . . . contained universal themes of greed, power, fear, rivalry, suspicion and murder, fundamentals of the human condition which transcend regions, language and culture.”¹

Is that really how to describe human nature?

I asked my husband that question, and he replied, “Well, it is one side of human nature. But there is another side, too – that is altruistic, that seeks to be loved and to give love. The truth is, we are not condemned to the one nor guaranteed the other.”

So what do we do with all this?

Christian hands are certainly not clean. The Middle East is full of Crusader castles. Evidence of Christian attempts to capture the world for Christ by force. What’s been even worse is reading of the role of “Christian” militias in some really awful conflict in Lebanon. Or shift the globe a little and remember the Protestant/Catholic atrocities in Ireland.

This is not what I intended in going to Lebanon.

My purpose was to push the envelope of my thinking on the challenges of unity and diversity as I give leadership to a denomination that calls ourselves a movement for wholeness. My idea was to focus on wholeness!

Instead, it caused me to stare unblinkingly in the face at the cruel side of human nature. And to acknowledge that it is within us all.

What, then, about this man on the cross, calling for forgiveness?

We finally, I think, have to trust him on this. Hard though it may be, the cost of not seeking forgiveness is just too great.

From Lebanon, we went to Jerusalem. An Israeli woman sat with us there. She was with the Parents Circle, a group of Israelis and Palestinians who have lost loved ones to the ongoing conflict. She had lost her 18 year old son to a Palestinian sniper. Eighteen years old. She could have been bitter. Instead, she sat there holding the hand of the Palestinian woman next to her, seeking comfort, speaking of the need to end hostility.

She talked about the cost, about the damage to a young generation, on either side, who participates in the violence. “What happens,” she asked, “when a young Israeli soldier turns back a Palestinian woman at a checkpoint; a woman in labor, trying to get to a hospital, and the baby is born right there and dies? Do you think that young soldier ever tells his mom? How does he process the guilt?”

¹ Blanford, Nicholas, *Killing Mr. Lebanon*. I.B. Tauris. London. New York. Preface, p. IX

Church, the world is a brutal place . . . Lebanon, Congo, Darfur,, the random violence of our own streets and cities. We often don't want to look at it. I don't want to look at it. Much less to forgive it.

I listened to a woman who works with torture survivors – living in the US!? She said that churches often don't want to know about their need. It's too threatening to a theology of safety so many of us hold dear. They don't want to hear about the bad stuff. Like me. I want life and human nature to be like my feel good sports movies that follow a formula where the good guy pulls it out in the end and all is triumph to the swell of a great sound track and you can breathe easy because right wins.

But what if life isn't like that yet because the fullness of God's intent for creation is not yet fully known upon the earth? What if things aren't fair? What if, in the larger historical picture there are no completely righteous acts of punishment, only one act of revenge after another, as the acid of unforgiveness eats slowly away from within – within our societies, surely, but also with ourselves, and even within our churches?

Then, I think, we have to turn our eyes upon Jesus.

We have to look at the one without sin, cruelly nailed and hung from a cross until he can no longer breathe, who from that spot says . . . “Forgive.”

If it weren't for the Amish . . . you couldn't believe it.

If it weren't for the Israeli mom sitting there next to the Palestinian sister who's now lost two brothers to the impasse, but the two women are holding hands, holding each other's grief, witnessing to the power of personal forgiveness and calling for reconciliation, if it weren't for them you couldn't believe it.

If it weren't for the powerful heart of Nelson Mandella, who came back from 27 years of prison– not bitter – but a better man and who led a whole country toward forgiveness, you couldn't believe forgiveness like this is possible.

Most mainline Protestants talk a lot about unity. Disciples consider it our special calling: Being a movement for wholeness. Our critics say such talk sounds like cheap grace. That is sounds too easy. But it's not easy.

How do you forgive the person who has killed your child? Or the militia who has shelled or burned your town?

Heck, we have trouble forgiving the person who watches the opposite cable news network!

But then there's those Amish. And there's Mandella and Tutu. And the Parents' Circle in Israel/Palestine. And the knowledge that if we don't forgive, the acid eats away at the container that is our own hearts, eats our own societies, eats even our churches, from within.

And there's Jesus who calls us to forgive.

There's an old Hollywood movie that gets this part of it right. It's called Habits of the Heart. A woman's husband is murdered. An unlikely array of individuals come together to bring in the cotton crop and save the widow's farm. And in the end there's a communion service where the tray is passed from black to

white to blind to the widow to . . . (wait a minute!) to her (murdered) husband – and you know something unusual is happening here . . .

. . . a vision of the power of Christ's Table to bridge both space and time and culture and this world and the next . . .

and then the woman's husband passes the communion tray . . . into the hands of the young man who is his murderer, and the table has become a table bridging the gap of the violence that is between them, a table of forgiveness as they share the bread of life and the cup of hope that we know in Jesus.

Most Mainline Protestants, are people of a pretty open table. Disciples even call ourselves a People of the Table. Critics talk about our open table as "easy," "loose," even "promiscuous."

Maybe.

Or maybe, when properly understood, it 's the place where we remind ourselves of the challenge of living out of a love as large as Jesus' love on the cross for all of us, where we confront the risk of forgiveness. The place where we remember that if the world is ever to be a better place beyond the next revenge, it has to start with us learning to forgive.

"29 For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves," says Paul. The tough love of discerning the body. Of reconciling with the unreconcilable. Of risking forgiveness.

When Abraham met those three strangers and offered them the extravagant hospitality of his home and table, he was taking a significant risk. He didn't know if they would overtake him and abuse his hospitality. We, who know the ending of the story, know that he entertained angels unawares, but it might not have been so – as far as he knew, when he went out to meet them, the story might not have ended well. But the etiquette of his table was inclusive and wide.

As is the etiquette of the Lord's Table. When Paul says to examine yourself, he does not only mean to take note of your personal little failings of the last week. This is not only an individual matter.

This is a matter of pushing back the chairs around that table ever farther, to include more and more of God's children. The Apostle Paul, here, is still working on issues of food and economic class.

But the principle extends. The question stands. To whom do we offer the hospitality of the Lord's Table?

Abraham gives us a clue – to whomever enters our gate.

Jesus gives us a clue. To whomever needs to be reconciled with us. Whoever we need to forgive or from whom we need to ask forgiveness.

How big is our heart when we approach the communion table? How much reconciliation can a person stand? How much forgiveness can a spirit mete out?

I pray that I can learn the same largeness of heart and generosity of spirit of a grieving Israeli mom or Palestinian sister, of an Amish family, of a South African former political prisoner. I hope it doesn't take torture or massacre to test me, but that even in the everyday divisions of politics and church fights, it can be as

straightforward as agreeing to walk together in mutual respect as we work out our differences.

As uncomplicated as gathering weekly at the Table of reconciliation.

As powerful as meeting there the One in whose largeness of spirit we are safe to begin pouring out the acid of unforgiveness from our own hearts, meeting at the Table the One in whom we are all embraced and forgiven and sent forth to begin again.

As at the Table we meet Jesus, who from the cross called out, "Forgive!"

and in whose forgiveness, we find life, we find wholeness.

May it be so.