

7 Epiphany – Year A  
Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18  
1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23  
Matthew 5:38-48

Faith, Laguna Niguel  
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### Unlimited Forgiveness/Impartial Love

When I was growing up in a small town in New York State, I remember vividly the small incinerator we had in our back yard. In that incinerator, my family dumped all of our burnable trash and burned it to ashes. This was in the days when people were not worried about air pollution, and the local Board of Health – if we had had one – had nothing to say against burning trash.

I remember that every once in a while my mother got a little irritated at one of our neighbors, who, without even asking, would burn a load of trash in *our* incinerator. My mother would say things like, “Of all the nerve!” or, like a line out of *The Three Bears* – “Someone’s been burning trash in *our* trash basket!”

Small wonder, then, that as a young child in church, what I *thought* I heard people praying every Sunday was: “And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets”! I can’t say that my comprehension was enriched any when I was told that the word was really *trespasses*; and I was confused even more when I first went with a friend to the neighboring Presbyterian Church and heard them use the word *debts* – which, at very least, I reasoned, was a simpler word than *trespasses*. At any rate, that part of the Lord’s Prayer and today’s Gospel Lesson both say something not only about the psychological dynamics of *forgiveness*; but also about a *way* of forgiveness that goes beyond the reasonable principals of moral living.

First of all, I like to outline four different approaches to the idea of forgiving others, each of which has some biblical foundations. The first possible reaction to being wronged in some way is UNLIMITED VENGEANCE. This is the ethical credo of the barbarian and is present, at very least, in parts of the Books of *Judges* and *Deuteronomy*. Unfortunately, UNLIMITED VENGEANCE is not merely the belief of the historic stage of civilization called barbarism. It is the barbarian in every person who says, “Once you do something to wrong or hurt me, I have the right (or) am justified in doing *anything* to you in return.”

Slightly higher in the scale of morality than UNLIMITED VENGEANCE is LIMITED VENGEANCE. Its clearest statement Jesus refers to in today’s Gospel: “It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” (See *Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21*). These laws found in ancient Hebrew Law indicated a clear concern for limiting revenge. In one sense, they show a rough-and-ready sense of justice *opposed* to excess. Still, we must confess that this “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” standard is far from being the conviction of only primitive or ancient people. It is widely echoed in our own time perhaps most blatantly in our efforts to deal with the vastly increasing number of lawsuits which presumably have the principal of retributive justice as their basis.

A third approach is LIMITED FORGIVENESS. Later on in Matthew’s Gospel, Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21) We need to know here that Rabbinic teaching specified that a person must forgive another *three* times. So Peter, in his question to Jesus, probably thinks that

he's going pretty far – because he takes the Rabbinic three times, multiplies it by two, adds one for good measure, and asks Jesus, probably with eager self-satisfaction, if it will be enough – or even *more* than enough, if he forgives seven times.

Jesus' response to Peter proclaims the fourth approach to forgiving others. He says to Peter, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22) – seventy times seven meaning there is no reckonable limit to forgiveness. We move from Peter's LIMITED FORGIVENESS to Jesus' UNLIMITED FORGIVENESS. This is not an isolated statement on the part of Matthew's Jesus. UNLIMITED FORGIVENESS underlies Jesus' sayings in today's Gospel that we are to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, and give our cloak as well if our coat is asked for.

We really need to *hear* what's being said here. The principal "Do not resist one who is evil" (Matthew 5:39) is given four applications: when someone strikes you, when someone takes you to court, when someone forces you to go a mile, and when someone seeks a loan from you. In each of these it is presumed that the other person has taken the initiative to harm or victimize or take advantage of – but the disciple takes the initiative to act in kindness, without hostility. The teaching does not call simply for non-retaliation or passivity – but rather for positive acts of good. One may be victimized but one is not to act like a victim. *Jesus* was not a victim. He *gave* his life. So Jesus' followers take intentional steps of healing and helpful behavior toward those who are violent and abusive. The point is that the *conduct* of Jesus' disciples is in no way determined by that of the one who harms and hurts. In a parallel kind of way, when Jesus calls on us to "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us", he is saying that *our* behavior, *our* attitudes should not be in response to or in reaction to the conduct of another. Neither friends nor enemies dictate the lifestyle of disciples – one is to love all, regardless of friendliness or hostility. The faithful take their pattern from the God who never reacts on the grounds of others' attitudes and behavior, but who acts out of God's own nature, which is to love and to bless, both the good and the evil, the just and the unjust. To be determined by the conduct of others is no more than to be as tax collectors and Gentiles. So being perfect even as God is perfect is not here referring to moral flawlessness, but to love that is not partial or immature. Partial and immature love embraces those who embrace us and rejects those who reject us. To be perfect is to love in the manner of our God who is without partiality.

But this all sounds *extremely* idealistic. How do we even *begin* to practice impartial love and unlimited forgiveness? Where do we even start?

When Jesus says, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"; "he is *not* saying that God's forgiveness is conditional upon our forgiving others. In the first place, forgiveness that's conditional isn't really forgiveness at all – it's that kind of limited forgiveness that Peter asked about. And in the second place, our *unforgiveness* is among those things about us that we need to have God forgive us most. What Jesus apparently is saying is that the pride which keeps us from forgiving is the same pride which keeps us from accepting forgiveness – and will God please help us do something about it."<sup>1</sup> In other words, in order to even be able to forgive, we need to be able to *accept* forgiveness. In order to even be able to love, we need to be able to *accept* the fact that we are loved by God. Our own deepest core sin is not letting ourselves be loved by God. It is saying, whether explicitly or implicitly, consciously or subconsciously – "No, I don't need it" to the love that God is offering.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973), p.29.

One of my all-time favorite movies is *The Mission*, starring Jeremy Irons and Robert DeNiro. Central to the story of *The Mission* is the kind of impartial love and unlimited forgiveness we are talking about.

In 18<sup>th</sup>-century South America, Mendoza, played by Robert DeNiro, is a well-known slave trader, a rather brutal mercenary, who, after murdering his own brother, goes into seclusion and deep remorse. Father Gabriel, a Jesuit Priest played by Jeremy Irons, confronts Mendoza, and in an intense contest between grace and damnation, Gabriel challenges Mendoza to choose his own penance, and beckons him toward possible salvation.

The punishment Mendoza chooses is to accompany the Jesuits (of whom Gabriel is the Superior) through rugged terrain – mostly up mountains and waterfalls, to the Jesuits' Mission, in the heart of the very hunting ground where Mendoza captured and sometimes shot the native Indians to be sold as slaves. Mendoza makes the trip dragging behind him the “baggage” of his past life – a huge bundle of armor and swords and instruments of war, which, during the incredibly difficult journey, threaten to kill him.

The turning point of the story and Mendoza's life comes as they reach the Mission at the top of the falls. The Jesuits have arrived first and are talking to the Indians. After a while, Mendoza, muddy and exhausted, crawls on hands and knees over the edge of the cliff, still dragging his load attached to him by a rope across and around his chest. The Indians recognize him as the one who has previously murdered and captured so many of their families, and they all aim their spears at him. The Indian Chief draws his own machete and places it threateningly at Mendoza's throat. One of the Jesuits moves, as if to intervene in the situation, but Fr. Gabriel holds up his hand to stop him – as if to say, “Let whatever happens, happen.” The Indian Chief tightens his grip on the machete and looks into Mendoza's defeated eyes. Then he looks carefully at the bundle which Mendoza has dragged with him. Looking at Mendoza once more, he takes his knife and cuts the cord that joins Mendoza to his burden. Seizing the bundle, the chief carries over to the riverbank, and with a mighty heave, slings the bundle into the river.

There is a moment of silence. Then Fr. Gabriel starts to laugh; then the rest of the Jesuits and the Indians join in. Slowly, Mendoza, too, realizes what has happened – and begins to laugh and sob at once in the acceptance of newly-offered redemption, through the unlimited forgiveness and the impartial love of the very people he has most wronged.

I can't help but think that this scene was a picture – perhaps one of many – of the Kingdom, or Reign of God. And you know, maybe I wasn't all that far off as a child. God forgives us our own trash baskets, so that we can forgive those who put trash in our baskets. God loves us first, so that we can love others in the full power of God's Holy, forgiving, and life-giving Spirit.

In the Name of God – Amen.

The Rt. Rev. Mary D. Glasspool