

Why God/Jesus? Why Church?:

Radical Forgiveness

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Ephesians 2: 4-10 Ephesians 4: 29-32 (Read from the Common English Bible)

On January 16, 1978, the concluding ceremony for Hubert Humphrey, former Vice President of the United States and U.S. Senator, was held in the Capitol Rotunda. The area was filled with political leaders and former presidents, including Richard Nixon. After leaving Washington D.C. under a dark cloud as he resigned from the Presidency in August of 1974, Nixon had not returned to the nation's capital, until that cold January day. At Humphrey's request, made shortly before he died, Nixon had come to pay his respects to his former political opponent. But no one in the rotunda that day was aware of Humphrey's invitation to Nixon. The former President walked into the grand room to find eyes staring at him and to hear a sudden quiet as conversations abruptly stopped when he passed. He felt most unwelcome and stood alone. Then President Carter walked into the room. As he moved to his seat, President Carter noticed Nixon standing all alone. Carter immediately changed course, walked over to Nixon, held out his hand and, smiling genuinely and broadly, embraced Nixon and said "Welcome home, Mr. President! Welcome home!"

The news magazine *Newsweek* reflected on the profoundness of the moment: "If there was a turning point in Nixon's long ordeal in the wilderness, it was that moment and that gesture of love and compassion."

With that salutation, President Carter gave former President Nixon grace, love and compassion that he did nothing to deserve. In fact, Nixon's actions while President gave President Carter every reason to keep his distance from him. But instead, the President made a point to do the opposite. He sought Nixon out and made him feel as no one else had; he made him feel welcome, feel as though he belonged in that place (Dunnam 1994).

Paul writes in Ephesians: You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift (Ephesians 2:8).

We hear about grace all the time. We sing about it, pray for it, state our belief in it, and read about it in the Bible. Yet, most of us are slow to embrace it, slow to be vulnerable in front of God and admit that we don't have it all together, even if it might seem so. Just a few moments ago we acknowledged our need for God's grace, made confident by saying it as one community rather than one person. But still, we each acknowledged our need for grace, and then we received assurance of God's forgiveness and restoration. We are free, friends! We are again saved by God's grace, restored and made new. The battle between dark and light is ongoing, and our imperfections are too. Thank God, grace is available each day and every day. We always need it. Whether we like to say it or not, we are sinners. Few of our sins are as public as President Nixon's were, but we all sin. We all turn away from God in one way or another, often in many ways, to fill our desires or to abet our fear or to stroke our egos.

We don't like to talk about our sins. Naming the ways we do wrong is far from America's favorite pastime. And it should be; who wants to recall those things we feel most badly about having done? Certainly not me.

We forget that, with God, it is not about being good; it's about being who God created us to be—humans, with imperfections and gifts, abilities and foibles, quirks and emotions, addictions and fears, mistakes, joys and accomplishments, pride and shame. We are humans, knitted together in our mother's wombs by a God who loves us just the way we are, who made space for us in this world out of unbelievable love, and who offers us grace and forgiveness for our sins.

In her final sermon to the congregation of House for All Sinners and Saints, "There is Only Grace" last month, Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber describes "grace not as when God is a good enough guy to forgive me for my failing but as when God is a source of wholeness, redemption and healing that makes up for my failings...which is more powerful than my failings" (2018). Friends, we are indeed saved by God's grace, if we only have the courage and the humility to receive it.

Imperfections and all, we are God's greatest accomplishment and we have been created to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way we live our lives. Receiving God's grace frees us to do these good things. Receiving God's grace empowers us to truly be who God created us to be, not better people but new people. That is what Jesus' death and conquering death was all about.

As Rev. Bolz Weber proclaims: "Becoming new people is what this Jesus-following thing is all about, and it doesn't happen by trying to be good. It comes from being robbed. Robbed of our old ideas of ourselves; robbed of our self-sufficiency; robbed of our piety" (2018).

July 18th marked the 100th birthday celebration of a man whose life was robbed from him for 27 years. A man whose home for 18 of the 27 years was a single cell some seven feet square around a concrete courtyard on Robben Island, four miles and a world away from the coast of Capetown, South Africa. During his imprisonment, Nelson Mandela was robbed of his family, his work, his reading materials, and even his voice; often being confined with solitary treatment. He was robbed of saying a final goodbye to his mother and son, remaining on the island during their funerals. He was robbed of all that makes a life, short of his physical being, and his faith. There was only God's grace left.

Throughout his life, Christian faith was central to Mandela's being. From attending a Wesleyan mission school where he received his Christian name of "Nelson," to being a Sunday school teacher, to demonstrating forgiveness upon his prison release, Nelson Mandela was grounded in being a Jesus follower. When he was robbed of all else in the prison cell, he still had God's grace, which was enough to carry on.

Nelson Mandela lived for freedom and equality, paying the price of losing both for decades of his life. And yet, upon his release from prison on February 11, 1990, Mandela spoke only words of gratitude and salute, no words of anger or hate, no suggestion of revenge, only the desire for reconciliation. He talked not about himself and his trials in prison but the trials others withstood in those years. From being robbed of practically

everything, Mandela emerged from prison in 1990 a new person, made humble and grateful in unique and powerful ways from his imprisonment.

In a speech on April 20, 1964, when he and 10 others from the African National Congress had been charged with sabotage for their plans to attack the government in protest of the apartheid policy in South Africa, Mandela made a long statement in which he concluded: "During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die" (Marshall 2013).

It is this same statement that concluded his remarks on February 11, 1990, upon his release. He had forever been changed by his imprisonment but his mission and commitment to South Africa and the end of apartheid remained the same. Perhaps it was this deep commitment and passion that enabled Mandela to practice such radical forgiveness to those who imprisoned him. Mandela's followers were angry with him for not seeking revenge from the leaders who had taken so much of his life away, leaders who even three decades later were not sorry for what Mandela had endured, who did not seek his forgiveness. Fellow anti-Apartheid activists could not understand Mandela's choice to seek reconciliation with these people, to forgive them their actions toward him and journey together to a harmonious future.

So many see forgiveness as a two-way street. The person who did the hurting shall not be forgiven until they apologize to the person whom they hurt. Of course, the person who did the hurting is proud and may really think what they did was justified, and so they never say I am sorry. Consequently, the hurt person refuses to offer forgiveness and the relationship breaks, even after both have forgotten why they were angry at each other!

I love the re-make of "One Day at a Time" that is on Netflix. With humor and wit, the characters grapple with issues facing us all. The show includes Rita Moreno, who is Lydia, the feisty, always-dancing, and always-with-lipstick-and-blush grandmother. On one show she was telling her daughter, Penelope, about the fight she had with her friend Tia Marta decades earlier that resulted in Tia taking a treasured lace scarf. Lydia was clearly still mad at Tia, even after 20 years, for taking the scarf, but when asked by Penelope what the fight was about, Lydia could not remember. In the next scene, Lydia goes to a drawer searching for something and finds the scarf. A relationship broken for 20 years over a scarf mistakenly thought to have been taken and a disagreement that cannot be remembered.

Friends, life is too short to not forgive. Nelson Mandela understood this. Jimmy Carter understood this. Do we understand this?

In talking with a wise, older woman about forgiveness, she reminded me that forgiveness requires intention and that it is very hard work. It is not the easy choice. It is not being a doormat and letting someone walk all over you. It is not letting the other person "win." It is gaining freedom to be at peace in your soul. It is how we become whole again. It becomes possible when we remember God's gracing love in our own lives and the constant forgiveness that comes through it. It is possible when we let go of our pride and get our egos out of the way. To do so is a radical choice. And it is not a popular one. We

have incorrectly associated forgiveness with weakness, and in so doing perpetuated brokenness in our world, brokenness that Jesus came to make whole.

Jesus gave radical forgiveness time and time again. Jesus forgives the adulterous woman; Jesus forgives Saul; Jesus forgives those who crucified him.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving of each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ,” (Ephesians 4:32) because it is what Jesus taught. But it is also because it is what Paul had experienced through Jesus *and* because he needed to forgive those in Ephesus who didn’t agree with his ministry, which he was having trouble doing. Paul wrote about forgiveness that he knew, forgiveness that he had received, forgiveness that enabled him to offer it to others. It is not easy, friends. As Fredrick Buechner reminds us: “...our unforgiveness is among those things about us which we need to have God forgive us the most” (1973).

Grace and forgiveness. Two simple words with profound meanings, a gift and an action that go hand in hand. It is very hard to offer forgiveness if one hasn’t received God’s grace, simply because of our pride. Pastor Bolz Weber puts it candidly: “When I forget about grace, I begin to feel entitled to all the good things in my life” (2018). When we forget about grace, we forget to give grace to others; we forget that we can’t do it all alone; we forget that it is not just the other people who mess up. We do, too; we forget that just as we need to forgive, there is stuff we need to be forgiven for, too. And then we hear these words again: “You are saved by God’s grace because of your faith. This salvation is God’s gift” (Ephesians 2:8).

Let us remember to claim this gift and use it to offer radical forgiveness to each other, bringing about harmony and reconciliation to our worlds just as Mandela did to his. Life is too short to do anything else. Amen.

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