

"IS TRUE FORGIVENESS IMPOSSIBLE?"

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Last Thursday--September 11th--we observed a tough anniversary that deeply rocked our world. Nearly 3,000 lives were lost on September 11th, 2001 as calculated murderers turned our passenger jets into missiles, and hit us hard. We all have stories from that day. I was serving a church in Ridgefield. We lost a fireman. I was at O'Hare airport boarding a flight for NYC as all the details unfolded.

Ripples and shock waves are still going out. I heard it repeatedly on TV and read it on Facebook, "*never forget.*" Of course, we dare not forget those who perished. But not everyone means that as they sharpen their gaze and utter "never forget." For some it means we will never finish avenging what was a heinous, evil act. Some are convinced it is impossible to forgive such cold-blooded acts of murder.

On Thursday my feelings were all over the place, like yours. In my mind's eye, I saw families forever impacted by losing husbands and wives, dads and moms, sons and daughters. As I'm with those facing penetrating loss, I'm always asking how they're moving through it. Are they stuck? Is there any movement? It's slow, slogging work. But as we feel movement, we are healing. That movement invariably takes us through a land called forgiveness, a place we'd much sooner skip.

We find it harder to forgive and easier to hate those different from ourselves, like Al Qaeda kamikazes and Isis thugs bent on destroying what we call civilization. With Jesus in Matthew today demanding deep forgiveness from all seeking a life with God, this tale of a father from the Oklahoma City bombing might work better.

A man named Bud Welch suffered through the horror of his daughter Julie dying in Oklahoma City's Federal Building. "At first, I wanted Timothy McVeigh not even to have a trial, but just to die," said Mr. Welch. "But then I saw that I would only contribute to this circle of violence that helped produce Timothy McVeigh. What good would it do the first 168 victims of the bombing of the Federal Building to add one more?" Of course, this makes a lot of sense in the clear light of day. But how many restless nights did he sweat through, suffering the loss of his girl? Where did he find the Christ-like heroic strength to forgive? How does it happen?

But the more we hear from the Bud Welches of the world, the more we realize that such a miracle as forgiveness of this magnitude isn't an individual heroic act. Others helped him down this path, inviting mercy and grace rather than inciting hatred and vengeance. We could say that loss took his soul upon a long journey. Though he did not start in a land called forgiveness, Bud Welch ended up there.

One of the first things Welch did was seek out Timothy McVeigh's dad for a visit. As Welch sank back into the living room and saw Timothy McVeigh's graduation picture on the mantel, it startled him. He stared at the photo and began to grieve,

even cry. For in that moment he realized here was another father facing his own loss. He actually shared a connection with this other dad, a bond called grief. This demythologized McVeigh as evil incarnate and seeing him as pure monster.

We imagine forgiveness is all internal work, going off by yourself to muster the will to perform a superhuman and individually heroic spiritual act of mercy. That's not how it occurs. Sitting around stewing only cultivates hatred and retribution. As Welch got outside himself, as he faced the epicenter of evil—the place where his daughter's murderer was raised—it evoked empathy and compassion in him.

We find God in the oddest places, realizing he's there, doing his work. At the outset, forgiveness was impossible. Suddenly there it was, within his reach. Welch's advance in forgiving the unforgivable was not some natural process, waiting to ripen. Quite naturally, we revel and churn in scenarios of reprisal and payback. If it remains about our wounded pride, we generally opt for swagger and bluster. Swagger is posturing for a dog-eat-dog world; forgiveness requires quiet humility.

I don't know where all of your wounds are, where your resentments reside, where you feel like turning your back on your persecutors is the best you can give them. But I do know you have places in your life where forgiveness seems impossible. I know that because injury abounds in this world. And grace is so preciously rare.

As we open worship, we pray Jesus words, "forgive us, Lord, just as we forgive those who attack, damage, and injure us." The parable of the unforgiving servant reminds us how completely our forgiveness is caught up in forgiving others. And nothing about being human suggests we're equipped for it or any good at it. We aren't born forgivers. We only forgive as this higher way gets nurtured within us.

That often feels impossible. Forgiveness is a miracle of God's grace. We only forgive as we walk with God and notice his forgiveness healing the debris of human ache. Maybe that is why this table is so important to us, holding the bread in our hands, the substance of God's love, broken for us; holding the cup, the life of pure love, spilled for sinners like you and me. This table is the realm of miracles.

In John Irving's *The World According to Garp*—God bless you Robin Williams—Helen and John have terribly wounded each other. They're quite literally unable to speak because of injuries they've suffered in an accident. John, after days of raging silence, takes a slip of paper, scribbles on it, and hands it to his estranged wife, "I don't blame you." After a while, he hands her another slip, "I don't blame me either." And then finally a third slip, "Only in this way can we be whole again."

Sometimes we like to say, "God never asks more of us than we can handle." And then we hear today's parable, so honest about forgiving, how difficult it is, how essential it is. And suddenly that saying feels more like sentimentality than truth. I for one don't believe Jesus commands us to do impossible things. But Jesus does command humanly impossible things that the grace of God makes possible.

Behind Jesus' command is a promise, a way, a loving power not of this world. As we tap into his way, we realize what's impossible for us by ourselves is within our reach as put our pride aside, find God in our hurt, let the Cross become real. By our power, we are limited, finite, even stuck. With God, all things are possible.

As we've been forgiven, we can forgive. By ourselves, we'll never measure up to such an unbearably lofty standard. With God, the impossible becomes possible. Amen.