

## FORGIVENESS, RESENTMENT AND GRACE

A long distance truck driver sits at the Rest Stop counter finishing his dessert when three members of an outlaw Motorcycle gang enter and decided to give him a hard time. One takes the salt shaker and shakes a little salt onto his bald head. The others laugh. The second puts his finger into the man's apple pie. More laughter. The third tips the man's coffee cup into his lap. The trucker steps back from the counter, picks up his hat and pays his bill. He leaves. The cyclists are observing this and chuckling to themselves. One says, "Well that's one trucker who wasn't much of a fighter, seems to me." Just at that point the waitress, a salty veteran of many years, finishes looking out the Rest Stop window and as she passed by the bikers, she says: "I don't think he's much of a driver either, he just ran over three Harleys with his rig."

There is a little thing deep inside of each of us that silently rejoices when we hear such a story. They got theirs. What goes around, comes around. Paybacks are sweet. There is something in us that is drawn to sweet revenge. While that may be, it is not really a good thing for us and it is also not what Our Lord places before us as his teaching in the arena of forgiveness. It surely is not how God treats us although some people think God acts like that. Always ready for a divine "gotcha."

A personal story from many years ago. The year was 1988 and I was the Assistant Vicar for Catholic Education. Cardinal Bevilacqua had recently been named as Archbishop of Philadelphia. That was February. In April the Vicar for Catholic Education abruptly resigned his position. The new Archbishop indicated that he wanted a Search Committee for the position of Vicar for Catholic Education. Under Cardinal Krol the Archbishop would simply have appointed his chosen successor. So, for the first time a number of us priests and Religious were asked to put together a Resume, our Curriculum Vitae and participate in being interviewed by the Search Committee. By August the process was completed and surprisingly I was appointed the new Vicar for Catholic Education. I had less than three years of experience in Central Administration and another seven years teaching. I was Archbishop Bevilacqua's first major appointment in August of 1988. I was 41 years old. By June of 1991 I was his first major firing. Needless to say my three years did not go good. I was now 44 years old.

There were many things that went wrong. Some I had nothing to do with but they became known on my watch and others I bore complete responsibility for. I was told I was going to be replaced and then asked what I would like my next assignment to be. I opted to become a pastor and was assigned here in June 1991 to succeed Msgr. Sullivan. Inside, I felt very wronged however. I felt a lot of shame because many had been supportive of me as Vicar and wanted me to succeed and I felt I had let them down. I felt I had let the Bishop down even though I also thought he never reached out a helping hand to an inexperienced young priest to help me get my administrative legs under me. I was thrown under the bus so many times that I used to take a tool kit with me to do some repairs while I was under there. When I was fired I harbored grievances against the bishop. It became a matter for confession. It surely became a matter for prayer. This was vitally important to me. It had to do with the vow I made at my ordination. You place your hands in the hands of the ordaining bishop. He asks you "Do you promise obedience and respect to

me and my successors? I do, is my response. Getting to forgiveness would get me to respect again. It was more than a year and a half later before I felt that I was able to forgive what I considered the wrongs done to me. On Retreat that year I realized that my forgiveness was actually very shallow. It hadn't penetrated too far. It really took me a number of years to work through to real forgiveness. I wanted to get to real forgiveness. Over time I did. But there is nothing automatic about forgiveness. You have to seek it, own it, want it and embrace it—at each level. There are several levels usually.

Gradually I was loving being assigned to serve here at Saint Anthony's and when the Church burned, all my past experiences I used to get us through that crisis. Slowly it began to become clear to me that all along it was part of God's divine plan that He wanted me to be here at Saint Anthony's. The only way He could get me here was to have me fired there. At the end, I came to see my firing as a great grace in my life. And the ways of God which at times seemed so foreign now began to make sense. And so I began in earnest to pray for my "enemies" or those who persecuted me. I prayed for those who hated me or had done me harm or done bad things to people I loved.

I confess that, by nature, I am not someone who is drawn to revenge but that is a different animal than forgiveness. You have to ask to be set free from the desire to get even. If you do not then you will be swallowed up by your resentment. And resentment is deadly. But it doesn't kill the person you resent. It kills you—slowly. It is true that resentment is like drinking poison yourself all the while hoping that as a result the person you resent will suddenly die. No, they will live and you will die. Bad. Very bad. My friends there are all kinds of different ways to respond when we are under attack. The big two we are all familiar with are Fight or Flight. We get each of them, strengths and weaknesses, plusses and minuses. But there are more. We can embark on the road to denial or grow defensive. We can become a fabulous counter-puncher. We can become passive aggressive, smiling away while cutting someone's legs off. We can vilify or circle the wagons or spread lies. There are many ways.

Jesus puts forth his Way. Read from John 18:19-24: *The high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his doctrine.* <sup>20</sup> *Jesus answered him, "I have spoken publicly to the world. I have always taught in a synagogue or in the temple area<sup>[a]</sup> where all the Jews gather, and in secret I have said nothing.* <sup>21</sup> *Why ask me? Ask those who heard me what I said to them. They know what I said."* <sup>22</sup> *When he had said this, one of the temple guards standing there struck Jesus and said, "Is this the way you answer the high priest?"* <sup>23</sup> *Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?"*

When wronged, Jesus espouses the position of standing in the truth and remaining steadfast even if the same response is forthcoming. Jesus' way forces the striking one to face the reality and truth of what He is doing. That is the only way evil can be overcome. It does not seem to be very effective or have much power. But it is powerful. It is of God. It does triumph in the end and it leads to life—the life that will never end. And it is God's Truth. It is no mere recommendation or proposal. "Here, why don't you try this?" No. It is presented, taught and embraced as the Truth. And my friends, it works. It just needs time and prayer. It is what Jesus himself lived. Listen. We have been given the Spirit of Truth. We are Temples of the Holy Spirit. Forgiveness is the Spirit's realm. Unity. Harmony. Community. Comity. The Spirit has been given. That same Spirit in you I

will shortly call forth to bless the gifts of bread and wine that will then become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. It is all here—already. And underway. We have to choose to believe it. We have to choose to live it. We have to choose to help others accept it.