

“Love Means Saying You’re Sorry”

I am sure many of you remember a blockbuster movie from 1970 starring Ali McGraw and Ryan O’Neal. The movie was called “Love Story.”¹ That movie introduced a phrase into popular culture that plagues us to this day. “Love means not ever having to say you’re sorry.” In the movie “What’s Up Doc?” Barbara Streisand’s character offers up that aphorism to Ryan O’Neal’s character who responds, “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

It is certainly one of the dumbest things ever spoken. The idea that we can hurt someone we love without consequence or remorse is absurd. It trivializes love which is the notion that when we care for another person we want the best for that person and strive to do only what is best for that person. When we hurt someone, especially someone we say we love, we must ask for forgiveness. That is the point of the passage that comes before today’s scripture, the passage you heard last week. When we don’t ask for forgiveness it is the responsibility of the injured person and eventually the wider community to point out the injury and allow the offender to ask for forgiveness.

What follows that is Peter’s question, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter being the Biblical “Everyman” who represents you and me and our unoriginal thinking, offers what he thinks is a generous number of times to forgive someone. He thinks that if you hurt me more than seven times I should give up on you.

But Jesus responds, “Not seven times,” and I imagine he pauses here and Peter thinks Jesus is going to offer a lower number. Then Jesus continues, “...but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”² Peter once again underestimates the powerful message that Jesus is offering. Let’s be clear seventy-seven is not to be taken literally. We are not to walk through life with a notepad or a forgiveness app where we keep track of the number of times we have forgiven one another or been forgiven by another. The point is that seventy-seven, barring the app, is impossible to keep track of. Jesus is saying we keep on forgiving endlessly.

To drive this home he offers a parable. In it a man who is obligated to his master for a huge debt of ten thousand talents (think the average yearly salary multiplied by 10,000 or about \$60 million) is about to be sold off along with his family to obtain some restitution for the debt. Obviously selling them to another will not actually retire the debt, but perhaps the owner just wants him out of his sight. The man begs for more time (a rather unreasonable request given the enormity of the debt), but the owner relents.

Yet no sooner does the slave walk out the door having been given this huge reprieve that he runs into someone who owes him 100 denarii or about a

¹ The film was based on the novel of the same title by Erich Segal.

² The Greek text can also be translated “seven times seventy times”

third of a year's wages. When this fellow slave asks for additional time, the first slave does not relent and has him thrown in prison — so much for paying it forward.

Word of this interaction reaches the master who has the first man dragged in and scolds him for not having mercy on his fellow slave as the master had for him. This man is neither sold as was first threatened or put in prison. Rather he is tortured until he pays his debt. Never mind that a man in prison or being tortured is unlikely to be able to come up with the money to pay off a debt large or small. This is a parable not the real world. The matter is that the Kingdom of Heaven is like the man who forgives someone whose debts or sins are preposterously huge. Because we know that we have been forgiven we are also to forgive. As we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We are forgiven so we forgive.

This is hard, because it seems we are like the indebted slave prone to want retribution or restoration even when we think we are due forgiveness and understanding. It is a sad predicament and one that is ages old. How many times have we thought or heard someone say, "I will get you for doing that." In our fury over being wronged we want to exact profound revenge to satisfy our pain.

It seems to be in our nature that we do not forgive easily. When we see true forgiveness we are astounded. Such as the Amish community after a school full of children were murdered, or the families of those killed in the Charleston Church Massacre who forgave the perpetrators of these heinous crimes. They also promised to pray for the killers and even reached out in care to the killers' families.

I doubt it was easy. They are just as human as you and me. Instead of letting their instincts for retribution and revenge win over them, they followed Jesus. They also knew that carrying the burden of anger and hate would not do them or the victims any good. They knew that demanding their pound of flesh would not do any good either. Revenge may be a dish best served cold, but it is also one that does not satisfy. It winds around our heart like a parasitic vine, strangling out love, joy, and hope.

True forgiveness is a balm for our souls. It gives us a clear view ahead without the ever present clouds of anger that suck the life out of us. It helps us love more clearly and dearly every person we meet. It helps us live in love and not fear. It helps us carry on despite grief at our hurts and losses. Jesus told us twenty centuries ago that the human heart burdened with anger and pain becomes stone. The only way through that is forgiveness. It is a gift we give ourselves as much as the one who hurt us. True forgiveness can be a gift that keeps on giving as long as we recognize that it is a gift that we cannot earn or merit, but has been given to us by God out of love for each of us as a beloved child.