

Lenten Sermon Series

Forgiveness 4: Forgiving God; Forgiving Society

Psalm 22

2 March 2008

In seminary I took a class on the Old Testament that was team taught by a minister and a rabbi. The rabbi at one point said, "The great issue for Jews after the Holocaust is how to forgive God." My classmates and I were all shocked. "Forgive God?" we protested. "But human beings were responsible for the Holocaust, not God!" But the rabbi wouldn't be put off. "God chose us as his people. He didn't have to, but he did, and he promised to care for us and keep us safe. If that promise is to mean anything, then we have to call God to account." It was a bold, shocking statement, and I have never forgotten it.

Indeed, the Holocaust starkly raises both of the questions we'll address today: forgiving God, and forgiving groups of people for crimes against humanity. And the one is sometimes blamed for the sins of the other. Of course God isn't responsible for the crimes of the Holocaust, nor is God to blame for the crimes of slavery, for the death of infants, for the destruction wrought by hurricane Katrina, nor for cancer or AIDS or any other scourge. One of my books pointed out how wrong it is to blame God for these things, that there are enormous theological problems with the notion of forgiving God. And that writer is completely right. If you think about it, it doesn't make rational sense. Can God sin? Do we humans have the moral weight to forgive God? It doesn't make sense at all.

And yet I think it makes perfect sense from an emotional perspective. After all, surely God is more than an idea. God is a relationship. As the rabbi said, God has a relationship with us. We promise to obey God's word, to follow God's way, but God has also made promises to us. That doesn't mean nothing bad will ever happen to those whom God loves, but surely it is right for us to protest when life seems to contradict our sense of God's goodness.

The Bible abounds with stories of anger against God. Job, who suffered an endless stream of tragedies, demanded that God come down and face him so Job could call him to account. The psalms are full of people raving against God for the ways they've suffered, and even Jesus himself on the cross cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He quotes the 22nd psalm. It may not be rational, but the emotions ring all too true.

Indeed, if we look at our discussion of forgiveness from last week, we can see how easily it applies to God as well. We are often tempted in the name of piety to defend God against those who would claim to have been wounded by God, but remember: the one who is wronged is the one who gets to define those terms. Recall the steps for creating a grievance: 1) you take the offense too personally; 2) you blame the offender for your emotions, and 3) you create a grievance story. Can't all of these be true with regard to God? A tragedy or injustice occurs, and the injured one takes it too personally. Why was my child taken? Why did that tornado destroy my home? People also blame God for their own feelings. I think of this when I hear certain self-righteous atheists railing against God and religion for all the ills in the world. And people most certainly create grievance stories against God.

We can sit here all we want and say that this is irrational, immoral, impious, but those feelings are real. If forgiveness is done for the sake of the one who is wounded, to empower us to release our anger and move on, then surely it makes sense to speak of forgiving God. Indeed, a study referred to in one of my books found a correlation between the ability to forgive God, and lower rates of depression and anxiety.

In some ways, though, I think forgiving God is a no-brainer. It is, in fact, easy to forgive God and regain our trust – at least for most of us. After all, God knows our needs better than we do, and we can trust God to be loving, to be present with us, and to desire good things for us. We may not always be able to reconcile with the human beings in our lives, but God is ready for reconciliation whenever we are.

The same, however, cannot be said about societies, and this, I think, is the real frontier when it comes to forgiveness. From the dawn of civilization, civilizations have used their power to oppress. And those in power are almost never willing to admit they have done wrong. And our steps for creating a grievance can be just as true when it comes to these social ills. Groups of people have been wronged: Jews, blacks, women, gays. And those who are from the privileged group invariably have a hard time understanding those grievances. And logically so, because they aren't the ones who have suffered. Yet these wrongs can be perpetuated over centuries, and in ways that continue to cause lasting pain. So Christians do not understand why passion plays generate such horror and anxiety among Jews. Whites don't understand why blacks just can't get over slavery. It was 150 years ago, fer cryin' out loud! Men don't understand why women want to get off their pedestals of exalted femininity, and get into the public sphere on an equal basis. But these injuries are very real.

There is no shortage of examples to point out, but let's look at one case of social injustice where an attempt was made to address corporate forgiveness as well. We all know the story of apartheid in South Africa, of a political, social, economic and even religious system that was set up explicitly to benefit whites over blacks, and the violent means employed to keep that system in place. It's a miracle that apartheid was brought to an end without an all-out war, but enormous damage had been done, and the new nation was left with the question that faces all victims: how to move on without letting the anger continue to tear it apart.

So an experiment was set up called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For a limited amount of time, people who committed crimes during the apartheid era could come forward. If they fully and publicly confessed their crimes, then no charges would be made against them. However, if they refused to come forward, or were not fully truthful, then after the grace period they would be subject to the full force of the law. Wrongdoers and their victims were able to come face to face, to fully disclose the most horrible and hidden crimes of apartheid. For some people this brought a sense of closure. For the first time they were able to learn what had really happened to friends and family members who had vanished during those awful years.

Several years ago I met a man whose brother had been arrested by the police for his activities against apartheid. He'd never seen his brother again. The family knew he had to have been killed, but they didn't know it for a fact. The man told me what it was like when the officers who had arrested, tortured, and finally killed his brother, told what had happened at a TRC meeting. It was horrible for his family to hear, but at last they knew the truth of what had happened to their beloved son. They even found the mass grave where he had been buried. The man told me how for years he had hated the anonymous white policemen who had done this. But now he finally came face to face with the men themselves, and he found them to be old and frail, broken by the weight of what they had done, and the man said he was at last able to release the anger he'd been holding for so long.

That is a powerful story. But not everyone shares it. The relatives of Steve Biko, whose story was told in the film "Cry Freedom," wanted to have their day in court. Some victims felt pressured into forgiving, into giving up their right to legal justice, and some offenders showed little remorse in their confessions. The TRC was perhaps the most powerful example

of corporate forgiveness the world has ever seen, but it could not correct all the wrongs. It could not release all the anger. Not everyone was able to forgive or be reconciled.

And that gets us back to a point I made in my first sermon in this series, that in Judaism only the one who has been wronged can offer forgiveness. Millions in South Africa were harmed by apartheid. Not all of them are willing to forgive. It has been said that every Jew alive today lost a relative in the Holocaust. Not all of them are willing to forgive. Almost every African-American is descended from ancestors who were forcibly abducted from their homeland. Not all of them are willing to forgive. The list goes on and on.

And who should properly apologize for these crimes? What crimes need to be confessed? What reparations can possibly be offered?

This is an enormous and complicated issue, and obviously there are no simple answers. I'm not sure that corporate forgiveness is even possible, where an entire group of people forgives another entire group of people. Who, after all, can speak for everyone? But I think Luskin's approach to forgiveness can help individuals to experience some kind of forgiveness for corporate sins. As an example, when I was in college, "Women's Studies" was a new field of study. I took a number of the new courses, but over time I came to feel all the more angry and hostile about the terrible things that have been done to women. If you ever read about the history of gynecology, for example, which included horrific experiments performed on female slaves, it will turn your stomach. It's not that there's nothing to be angry about. It's not that we shouldn't pursue justice and equality. But too much focus on the wrongs that have been done can make you feel helpless and victimized. The steps to forgiveness, then, include taking things less personally. This means, for example, that men have not been out to get women. After all, all men are born of women – even Jesus! – and most of them love their mothers. History as we have it has been told mainly by men, and the women who lived at that time might have told it differently. Furthermore, not all men are out to get *me* personally! Just because some 14th century monk was sexist and horrible toward women, doesn't mean that what he said applies to *me* in any way!

Secondly, we learn not to blame the offender for our emotions. It's perfectly natural for me to be outraged by the way women have sometimes been treated throughout history, but I'm still responsible for my own emotions. I can't blame men for that, any more than I should listen to them if I say I get too emotional over an issue like domestic violence.

And third, we learn to take our grievance story and turn it into one that empowers us. Yes, there's been a lot of sexism throughout history, but there are also many, many stories of women who have not bowed down to it, even within the Bible itself. We can recover those stories and not give so much weight to what certain hostile men have said about women. Here is where I think Luskin's approach is particularly helpful, when he invites us to reclaim the original hope that had been betrayed. What hopes are worth believing in? That the world can be a safe place for women. That they will not be beaten or raped. That little girls can receive a full education, and that they will not be hindered in their dreams because of their gender. That women and men will be able to live together without putting one another down.

Every group of oppressed people has such hopes and dreams. These are the hopes that are worth dreaming about, the values worth having. Through the power of forgiveness, we can free ourselves of soul-crushing hatred and anger, and reclaim our own power to make the changes we want to see in the world.