

Want of Conformity
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 103:8-13
Readings from the New Testament: Matthew 6:12-13 (RSV); Colossians 1:11-14

In the spring of 1992, amidst the violence that followed the verdict exonerating officers involved in the Rodney King assault, Reginald Denny was pulled from his truck and viciously beaten. When he recovered, Denny met face-to-face with his attackers, shook hands with them, and forgave them. Will Willimon recalls a reporter covering the encounter and explaining to the television audience, "It is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage."

Is that the reality of mercy, that it is so counterintuitive, so at odds with the norm, so antithetical to logic that to offer it reveals one to be loopy?

Forgive? Why would we forgive when we can stay awake all night re-salting our wounds and dreaming of revenge? When scrolling through your social media feed have you noticed that if you pause longer than a millisecond on the ad or random film clip that shows up unsolicited, you will be bombarded for weeks with related ads and videos? I can't pinpoint when it was or even what it was, maybe some

scene from a Dirty Harry movie, but whatever it was, I have since been inundated with all these movie clips of heroes taking out a gang of bullies. You know, it's incessant, sort of funny as I scroll along. Looks like Mary had a margarita at lunch ... John's dog got a haircut ... Steven Seagal opened up a can of whoop-heinie on a couple of thugs ... Oh, the Taft's daughter got engaged ... There's a sale at Brook's Brothers ... The Ip Man beat the living daylights out of the bullies taunting a young student. They make revenge and the just desserts of bruises and blood seem so straight-forward, cathartic, and sweet. But it's an illusion, a fantasy, impossibly naive. Any deconstruction of cinematic violence would reveal broken lives still broken, emotional wounds still open, the messes only made larger, the future fraught with consequences.

Yet, the magnet of revenge remains so much stronger than the allure of mercy, which is ironic because mercy requires and reveals so much more strength than retribution, which so often reflects more weakness than strength. Why choose mercy when you can attack, insult, exile, litigate, stew, whine, retaliate, and pump up the hostility? Why offer grace when censure makes you feel superior? Because

superiority is an illusion, and self-righteousness is the kryptonite of faith.

We regularly recite 1 John 1:8 when we gather: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." To admit wrong is certainly among the top 10 most difficult things for a human to do, ranking somewhere between walking a tightrope across the Grand Canyon during a windstorm and time travel. We are so practiced, and yet so lame, in the art of blame shifting. We'll ignore facts; blame God; blame the victim; manipulate with emotions from waterworks to rage; gaslight the victim or the judge; project responsibility anywhere except self.

"If you hadn't been harping at me, I wouldn't have run into the mailbox." "I'm sorry you are under the impression that I hurt you." "Lighten up, I was only kidding." "I'll apologize, but it's actually your fault." When the well-past-sell-by-date rocker Ted Nugent referred to President Obama with a racist trope, his non apology apology went like this: "I do apologize — not necessarily to the President — but on behalf of much better men than myself,"

The verbal contortions we pursue to evade responsibility twist truth into rotini pasta. When news of Kevin Spacey purported assault on a young actor broke, he said, "if I did behave then as he describes" then it would be *inappropriate*." When innocent civilians are killed by drone strikes, the official line is something like, "We regret that our efforts to protect Americans resulted in the loss of life." Making homicide sound like a publisher's rejection letter falls short of owning the gravity of our transgressions. Among the primary factors digging the chasm between Americans is the refusal to *own up* to our *screw-ups*. Paul wasn't kidding when he said, "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Jesus said, "Pray like this ... Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." There is a reason for the order of this petition of the Lord's Prayer. Before there is motivation to forgive, before there is reconciliation, before there is peace, and I would go so far as to say, before there can even be a healthy relationship, there must first be self-awareness and acknowledgement of our own flaws, our own misdeeds, our own biases, our own sin, our own dirty laundry. Can't say you don't have it because you do. And if you're not aware of such in you, believe

me, you are probably alone in that assessment of yourself. The Psalmist laments, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." Sorry, not even Mother Teresa or Ted Lasso can escape the shadow of that one.

The Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession defines sin as follows: "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God."

Okay, so what is the law of God? Well, there was that occasion atop a wilderness mountain when a white-haired Moses came slipping and sliding down the slope lugging a couple of stone tablets. The Ten Commandments. When we stop arguing about where to hang them, and actually start reading them, we will discover that the commandments basically fall into two categories: four dissect our relationship toward God; and six outline our regard for everyone else. God and neighbor. Sound familiar? In Matthew 22, a lawyer asks Jesus, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a

second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Love God. Love neighbor. Jesus says that when you get there, you've got the Law of God pretty well in hand. So, what is this love? Paul tells us, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Has there ever been a day when you accomplished all of that with everyone?

Elsewhere, Paul describes love this way, "Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." So, how are you measuring up now? The Law of God: Love God, Love neighbor. Remember, the Shorter Catechism definition: "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God." Any want of conformity. I don't know about you, but I don't make it to breakfast. Remember 1 John, "If we

say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

Want a healthy relationship? You don't get to the starting line without acknowledging that. So, when we pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," we are owning up to what Jesus pointed out when he said, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."

If our most basic desire is to love and be loved, we need to go to the divine lumberjack, because we've got a log problem. Acknowledging our own sin is a big deal because we become less apt to judge and more apt to offer mercy; less apt to moralize and more apt to show empathy; less apt to patronize and more apt to see and appreciate equality. Less ego leaves more room for grace.

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." So, why debts and debtors, you crazy Presbyterians? Why not some other word ... like,

say ... trespasses? Or why not just call it what it is, sin? There is nothing wrong with those other words. They equally convey a worthy sense of what Jesus was driving at. ὀφείλημα is the Greek word for *that which is justly due* or *debt*. *ἁμαρτία* is the Greek word for *sin*. Matthew is using *debts* as a metaphor for *sin*, acknowledging an act of love so great in response to our sins, that we could never hope to repay it. Paul says, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." *A Declaration of Faith* says that on the cross, Jesus "was acting on behalf of God, manifesting the Father's love that takes on itself the loneliness, pain, and death that result from our waywardness. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not holding our sins against us."

Such love, revealed in mercy, is a gift we could never hope to repay, purchase, or earn. That's why Ephesians says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

You know when I am most afraid of lightening. It's not during a thunderstorm. You can't talk about the Bible very long without getting into God's concern for the poor. Inevitably, I'm going to talk about fighting poverty. So, on a regular basis, I'll hear something along the

lines of, "Preacher, I heard what you said about the poor and all, but we can't have folks out there getting something for nothing. It breeds dependency." Excuse me, while I step back. Forgive our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Periodically, we'll hear stories of individuals or families lost in the wilderness, and reporters with that over-rehearsed look of seriousness will describe the legion of volunteers, rescue squads, helicopters, and first responders expending tremendous effort and resources to locate the lost and bring them to safety ... And occasionally, if the person is found alive, some bold journalist will pose the question of who is going to pay for all that effort. For, as with a hospital, two or three days easily becomes six figures in cost. Most twenty-something hikers won't have the coins to pay for the first gallon of helicopter fuel. And yet, that does not deter the rescuers at all.

Willimon and Hauerwas conclude that, "It is the nature of this God to forgive, not because our God is soft on sin, but because God is determined to have a family, is committed to have us." (Will Willimon, Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, teach us...*) As the old hymn describes it *O Love, that will not let me go...*

So, Lord have mercy, and make us merciful. Forgive us our debts
as we forgive our debtors. For such is the nature of love. Amen.