

Valerie Elverton Dixon

For Field Education Lecture

Professor Sarah Drummond, instructor

March 6, 2007

Thoughts on Forgiveness

God does not forgive.

The Bible says in Joshua 24: 19-20: “But Joshua said to the people: ‘You cannot serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after He has done you good.’”

God forgives.

The Bible says in II Chronicles 7:14: “If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

God does not forgive.

Deuteronomy 32:35 says: “Vengeance is mine, and recompense; Their foot shall slip in due time, For the day of their calamity is at hand, And the things to come hasten upon them.”

The New Testament writers remind of this word in Romans 12:19 “Beloved do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay’ says the Lord.” It reminds us again in Hebrew 10:30 “For we know Him who said: ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay’: says the Lord, And again the Lord will judge His people.”

God forgives.

Psalms 86:5 says: “For You, Lord are good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You.”

And Jeremiah describes the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:33 -34 “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall they teach their neighbors, and every one their brother and sisters saying ‘Know the LORD, for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Jeremiah says further in 36:3 “It may be that the house of Judah will heal all the adversities which I purpose to bring upon them that everyone may turn from his evil way, that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.”

God does not forgive.

Mark 3: 29 says: “But they who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit never have forgiveness, but are subject to eternal condemnation.”

Galatians 6:7 says “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked, for whatever a man or woman sows, that they will also reap.”

God forgives and God does not forgive. Forgiveness/Unforgiveness. We are faced with an apparent contradiction, with a paradox, with an aporia. We stand at a crossroads where it seems that we cannot get to our destination of certainty in God’s forgiveness from the place where we stand. The same aporia exists within the ethics of forgiveness. Forgiveness is at once

immoral and unethical while it is hyper-ethical; it is ethics beyond ethics to follow the thinking of French philosopher Jacques Derrida reading the moral philosopher Vladimir Jankelevitch. Forgiveness is unethical when it asks us to forget the wrongs done to us, or to forget the wrongs that we have done. It is immoral and unethical when it asks us to forget the victims of crimes against individuals, against humanity, against nature, against creation, against God. Forgiveness is immoral when it disconnects act from consequence, when it evades responsibility or when it fosters a cheap grace. Forgiveness is hyper-ethical when it becomes ethics in its most pure formulation. To quote Derrida it is: “an ethics that carries itself beyond laws, norms, or any obligation. Ethics beyond ethics, there perhaps is the undiscoverable place of forgiveness” (Derrida On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness 36).

Still how do we navigate the aporia of God that does not forgive and God that forgives? I say the answer lies in contingency. God’s forgiveness is conditional. It depends. It is contingent, conditioned and dependent upon what we do. The logic of II Chronicles 7:14 is formulated as an If-Then proposition. If God’s people humble themselves, pray, seek God’s face, turn from their wicked ways then God will hear from heaven, forgive their sins and heal their land. The Psalms says that God’s abundant mercy is dependent upon our calling upon God. The new covenant does not come into force until the laws of God become part of our hearts and minds. It is contingent upon our knowledge of God. Jeremiah 36:3 tells us that God’s forgiveness depends upon us turning from our evil ways.

Now such contingency may seem contrary to the Christian message, but Jesus teaches that God’s forgiveness is conditional. We pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12) In Matthew 6:14-15, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus

teaches: “if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Jesus tells us we ought to forgive 70X7 as a way of saying that there is no limit to the number of times when we ought to forgive. In the parable of the unforgiving servant Jesus ends by saying: “So his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due him. So my heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you from your heart does not forgive his brothers and sisters their trespasses.” (Matthew 18:34)

Mark 11:25 reports Jesus teaching that forgiveness is important to prayer. “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive them, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.” Luke 6:37 says: “Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not and you shall not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven.” Luke 11: 3-4 in another iteration of the Lord’s prayer says: “Give us day by day our daily bread and forgive us our sins. For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.” Luke 17:3 says: “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them, and if they repent, forgive them.”

However Jesus gives us the most magnificent example of forgiveness that is given before the perpetrators ask: In Luke 23: 34 we hear Jesus’ prayer of forgiveness as he is dying on the cross. “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”

After the cross, while we are cleansed through the blood (I say Love) of Christ forgiveness is still contingent. I John 1: 7 - 9 says: “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and His word is not in us.” Here forgiveness is contingent upon confession.

God forgives and God does not forgive when God’s conditions have not been met. When we think about contingency, the etymology of the word takes us to the Latin word *contingere* which means to touch. It is the same root as the word contact which leads of to the idea of connection and interaction. (The American Heritage College Dictionary) Contingency, touch, contact, connection and interaction, weave us together in what Martin Luther King JR calls a network of mutuality. This fragile web of interrelation creates the context for the physics of interaction as bodies influence each other both in strong and weak ways. This notion of contingency also opens the door to our thinking regarding the intersubjective character of human-ness in the world.

We are not singular, atomistic, individuals. We each are legion. We come from parents; we are born into families and communities at a particular moment in history, in time and space. The people who raised us, the people we have met and the people with whom we interact and the people who are yet to come into our lives shape us. Our commitments become a part of who we are; our understanding of and relationship with God becomes a part of who we are. When it comes to forgiveness, we ask our selves: how does our intersubjectivity with God help us forgive

with a forgiveness that is not the immoral, unethical forgiveness of careless irresponsibility, forgetfulness and cheap grace, but is the ethics beyond ethics that forgives beyond the dictates of law, norms or obligation? Before we answer that question let us consider forgiveness within the economy of the gift.

We can see in the word forgiveness the concept of givenness. The English word pardon, at its root, takes us to the Latin word *donare* which means to give, to forgive. Jacques Derrida in his thinking about the gift gives us a radical understanding of givenness. (See Derrida's Given Time) The gift is only a gift according to Derrida when it is given without any expectation of repayment. When a gift is given with an expectation of reciprocation, it is not a gift, it is a trade. For Derrida, even the act of saying "thank you" erases the gift as pure gift because gratitude is a kind of payment. The gift ought to be given without even presenting itself as gift. It should go from one hand to the other without notice, without remark, without remembrance. When we consider forgiveness within this radical understanding, then forgiveness is something that is our human responsibility to give without expectation of repayment or without a request. We ought to give the gift of forgiveness without someone asking our pardon, without a confession of guilt.

Further, in Derrida's thinking about forgiveness, he will say that only the unforgivable ought to be forgiven. On the surface this makes no sense. But if we look deeper, we see that within any concept lies its opposite. Alongside any concept is its opposite. It is the yin and yang of reality. Were the opposite to disappear, so would the thing it is opposite to disappear. Thus, forgiveness and unforgiveness coexist. The forgivable and the unforgivable coexist. The possible and the impossible coexist. Without one there could not be the other. Vladimir Jankelevich says that there are some crimes that are unforgivable. For him "Forgiveness died in

the death camps” (Derrida in Questioning God 27). For Jankelevich when the crime is so large that no punishment can fit the crime, there is no punishment that can then be removed by forgiveness, then no forgiveness is possible. It is an inexpiable offense. Such is the case with the Shoah and I say we can extend this thinking to all the human atrocities against humanity: the Maa Fa of the Middle Passage; the genocidal removal of indigenous peoples across the globe from their lands; the Armenian, Bosnian, Cambodian, Rwandan genocides; the crime of apartheid; the structural crimes of poverty and inequality, and the madness of war are all unforgivable. They are inexpiable. Then there are the personal crimes of abuse both physical and psychic that scar individual human beings in unimaginable and often irreparable ways. Such for Jankelevich are unforgivable, to do so would be unethical.

But Derrida wants to forgive the unforgivable for the sake of forgiveness itself. Derrida wants to take us to the hyper-ethical moment, to an ethics beyond ethics where forgiveness performs the impossible task of forgiving the unforgivable. If forgiveness cannot forgive the unforgivable, then the worth of forgiveness within the economy of the gift diminishes to nearly nothing. In order for forgiveness to continue to exist it must move beyond the comfortable relationship of forgiving only the forgivable, but must cross the aporia of forgiveness and forgive the unforgivable. Such pure and unconditional forgiveness is in Derrida’s words: “ a madness of the impossible.” (On Cosmopolitanism)

So how do we enter into this madness. It is through the madness of radical love. It is through the madness of the radical love that Jesus came to teach us. It is through the anointing of this radical love that connects us with God through an intersubjectivity that opens us up to receive and to give the gift of grace. Ephesians 1: 7 -10 says:

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him.

Colossians 1:13-14 says:

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

Christ is not only the man Jesus, the historical teacher, prophet and revolutionary threat to the Roman empire, the only begotten son of God in our Christian faith. But Christ is the anointing. It is the anointing of the radical Love of God that is poured out upon all who will accept it. Jesus came to be the first among many. This means that those of us who believe, through our intersubjectivity with Christ, through this anointing have the where-with-all to forgive the unforgivable to enter into the “madness of the impossible,” to enter into the madness of radical Love.

This is an hyper-ethics, and ethics beyond ethics that forgives and remembers.

Forgiveness is unethical when it requires us to forget, to forget the pain of the transgression, to forget the tears and the suffering of victims. It becomes ethics beyond ethics when we remember the event, when we remember the pain and remember the victims. Yet, at the moment of remembrance, it is a moment to invoke again the radical Love of Christ through our prayers of

blessing and of forgiveness. Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, to do good to those who hate us, to pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us. (Matthew 5:44) Even as we pray our prayers of blessing and forgiveness through praying tears, we are mending the tear in the fabric that holds us all in right relationship. We are standing in the gap, resolving the aporia of forgiveness, drawing the map of how to get to forgiveness from unforgiveness. You can get there from here. When we do this, we are creating peace.

At this moment of war and of terror, at this moment of wars fought in the name of a War on Terror, when war is terror and a war on terror is terror on terror, we need the madness of the impossible. We need the madness of radical love. In my work on just peace theory, I have placed the various just peace practices within three broad categories – truth, respect and security. In this formulation memory is important to truth-telling. The ethics of memory that remembers fully, that tells the history from as many sides of the story as we can know is central to peacemaking. This means that for peacemaking it is necessary to remember. But the truth also is that what is done is done. The past cannot be undone. When we remember there is nothing left to do, but to forgive. Otherwise our feeble human attempts to seek vengeance or some kind of punitive, retributive justice through violence only leads to more violence. Witness the culture of vengeance that is feeding the sectarian violence that we see today in Iraq.

So our human work is to forgive and to love, to “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). Our human work is to “depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” (Psalm 34:14) And in the aporia of forgiveness, we leave the rest to God alone.

