

“Those who sins you forgive are forgiven.”

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One of America’s most visible Episcopal priests is the Rev. Stuart Kenworthy, recently retired vicar of the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. He presided and eulogized at state funerals for presidents and first ladies, as well as prominent civil rights leaders. Stuart was my classmate, good friend, and debate partner at The General Theological Seminary in New York City. He came to seminary already a Methodist minister, having served for five years plus. When asked, “Why take three years to become an Episcopal priest?” his answer was straightforward, “Because I want to be able to do more assure parishioners that God forgives, I want to be able to absolve their sins. And the Episcopal Church is the only body in the Protestant tradition that claims such authority.”

Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Inside the seminary’s Chapel of the Good Shepherd, carved into the wood and painted in gold are these same words, albeit in Latin, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Jesus conferred this authority to the Church and it has always been a core teaching in Anglicanism. Because Jesus takes sin seriously, we take sin seriously. Because he wipes away the stain of sin, we absolve penitents...in His name.

Within the Church, you may not have general authority to absolve the sins of third parties, but you absolutely can follow the words of the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our sins **as we forgive those who sin against us.**”

The importance of this profound power became evident to me when I was a young priest in my first parish. Trinity Parish was a family parish. I officiated at a combination of 20 baptisms and weddings each year. I always baptized more than I buried. It was in the context of pre-marital counseling that I learned an important lesson, Sigmund Freud was wrong!

Freud, the patron of psychotherapy, developed his theory of repression and hysteria after working with women who were brought to him for treatment. In his couch sessions, the women reported sexual abuse and rape at such a high rate, he concluded that something else was happening, that the women had these false memories, some deep unconscious conflict that was manifested as reported sexual trauma. For women he developed the diagnosis of “hysteria.” To this day, the term continues to be applied almost exclusively against women who are agitated. When is the last time you heard a man called hysterical? Thank you, Dr. Freud.

Part of my pre-marital counseling requires each person write a spiritual autobiography. This exercise is so rich. What knocked me over was that 5 of my first 6 brides reported being raped or victims of incest. And only one of these had shared their experience with their fiancé. That is crazy high. In the decades following

I have come to have confirmed more than 50% of brides self-report as part of their spiritual autobiography that they are victims of serious sexual abuse. We are not talking about a hostile workplace environment.

Freud had the same data, but he couldn't conceive that women were being abused by men so often as to describe it as commonplace. His own worldview simply could not take it in. So, kudos to Freud for collecting the data; but how very disappointing that he simply didn't believe it, he didn't believe the women who had been sinned against.

The unintended consequence of Freud's rewriting of these women's life-stories is tragic because there is no place to own the truth of the sin against them. They become double-victimized. If only their truth would be honored, then space would emerge in their lives to embrace the pain and then, as an act of grace, offer forgiveness to those who sinned against them. Isn't this the way of the cross? *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"* makes space for the Resurrection's message, *"Peace be with you. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven."* The movement of the Holy Spirit is not to keep us in chains, but to liberate us from the injury done to us. **And that happens through forgiving others.**

If you are holding onto your grievance, you are missing the opportunity of a lifetime to know joy.

Now this next part may sound controversial: Americans are among the worst in the history of humanity when it comes to holding a grievance and demanding our pound of flesh. Don't believe me? Then consider these facts.

Compared to every other country in the world, the United States incarcerates the most people outright and per capita. How many people? Today, 6.8 million are in jail or on parole. Put another way, at this moment our society has under lock and key or monitored restriction the equivalent of every man, woman and child in the combined states of Montana, Wyoming, New Hampshire, Delaware, Alaska, Vermont, North Dakota and South Dakota. Now add to this number direct family members who are obviously impacted, and you have a number exceeding the combined population of 21 of our 50 states in the Union. Doesn't that take your breath away? The population equivalent of 21 states has a direct family member in jail or on parole.

Americans demand vengeance. Every day we pass new laws to criminalize behaviors. A challenging book on this American legal phenomenon shows rather convincingly that the typical American commits three felonies every day. This is not because behavior has changed, rather it because our politicians think that we want them to be tough on crime, that more criminalization will create a safer society, so they oblige by changing simple infractions into misdemeanors and felonies. The application of trend is especially troublesome if your skin is brown or black. There is no space for grace, no tolerance for forgiveness.

"Those whose sins you forgive are forgiven, those whose sins you retain are retained." We American Christians are too drawn to retaining and adverse than forgiving sins.

(NOTE: AT THIS POINT CANON EDWARDS SPOKE OF ARCHBP DESMOND TUTU'S EFFORTS THROUGH SOUTH AFRICA'S TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION AS AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL THAT RESTORED MURDERERS, TERRORISTS, LOOTERS AND OTHER VIOLENT ACTORS TO THEIR COMMUNITIES IN ORDER THAT THE COUNTRY MIGHT HAVE A PEACE-FILLED FUTURE.

But Jesus invites us to forgive. When you forgive a sin against you, two are offered transformative healing: you and the one who sinned against you. When you hold your sin, no one is transformed. The evil done retains its corrosivity in the hearts of all those involved.

So often I hear parishioners explain why they feel inadequate to make a difference in the world. They point to my opportunity to free enslaved children and bring safe drinking water to remote villages in Africa. And I have been blessed. But know this, **anyone—including each person here, can be a radical forgiver. YOU can change the world by letting go and forgiving.**

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”