

How Do You Forgive the Unforgivable?

Leviticus 20:1-5

I John 1:5-2:2

Matthew 2:1-18

“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachael weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.”

They scarcely waked before they slept,
They scarcely wept before they laughed;
They drank indeed death's bitter draught,
But all its bitterest dregs were kept
And drained by Mothers while they wept.

So wrote poet Christina Rossetti of the slaughter of the innocents in Matthew's Gospel. How do you forgive the unforgivable? I chose the question, the hardest question of all the questions you asked, for Epiphany, the first Sunday of the supposedly New Year, the Sunday when we mark the coming of God's light into our darkness. You asked this question last spring, little knowing how innocents “that scarcely waked before they slept...that scarcely wept before they laughed” would drink “indeed death's bitter draught” in Newtown; you asked little comprehending how “its bitterest dregs” would be kept and drained by Mothers and Fathers as they wept and as still we weep with them. Luke's birth narrative is not dark enough to contain the world we must do our forgiving in. Only Matthew's will do.

How do you forgive the unforgivable? We ask this of ourselves in the context of our most intimate relationships, of those who know us best and so can hurt us most; we ask this of ourselves in the context of our common life, of the “deranged” as we call them, who wield death in schools and malls and movie theaters, the loner empowered by an automatic weapon to settle accounts with a society whose rejection could be tolerated no longer; we ask this of ourselves in the context of a century already bathed in the blood of terrorist attacks and counter attacks, the innocents felled alongside the guilty, day after bloody day; and we ask this of ourselves in the

context of our faith whose “crown” is the doctrine of forgiveness. How do you forgive the unforgivable?

The twentieth century Christian ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr insists that the “how” of forgiving has something to do with asking our question of ourselves--our unforgivable selves. In a chapter entitled “Love as Forgiveness” he acknowledges that forgiveness is “the most difficult and impossible of moral achievements. Yet,” he writes, “it is a possibility if the impossibility of love is recognized and the sin of the self is acknowledged.”

Listen again: Love as forgiveness is possible if the impossibility of love is recognized and the sin of the self is acknowledged. Taking the second first, according to Niebuhr the implicit assumption in your question—that you are/that I am the one doing the forgiving of the other who is unforgivable—is fundamentally flawed. Forgiveness, by definition, reverses the subject and object of the sentence, demanding that “the evil in the other shall be borne without vindictiveness because the evil in the self is known.” I think this is no cheap moral leveler that counts the difference between truth and falsehood, good and evil as of no consequence. Rather this is the unforgiving truth of forgiveness: that those who place themselves in the position of being good are those who lack mercy; that those who show mercy are those who know themselves most in need of mercy.

Let me quickly add, I know there is no fairness in this fact! You have been wronged, deeply wronged by another’s meanness or moral failure or malevolence or, in the case of heinous and inhuman acts, another’s evil. You are perfectly free and well within your rights not to act mercifully. Psychologists would even counsel that your mercy may only enable the offender to continue offending. Trust has been lost; vulnerability dictates self-care; the depth of evil must be reckoned with. Research and reason confirm these observations to be the case.

No, it is only if you mean to forgive the unforgivable that you must begin with yourself. Back to Niebuhr: “Forgiving love is a possibility only for those who know that they are not good, who feel themselves in need of divine mercy, who live in a dimension deeper and higher than that of moral idealism, feel themselves as well as their fellow[s] convicted of sin by a holy God and know that the differences between the good [person] and the bad [person] are insignificant in his sight.” Of course, we seldom see ourselves in this way. We take, instead, the side of the angels, whether angels to the right or the left, making us “more secure in [our] self-respect and therefore more ruthless against our foes.” The consequence, says Niebuhr, is that we fight for our causes—around the kitchen table or in the halls of congress or across the ocean--“with a fury of which only those are capable who are secure in the sense of their righteousness.” Face to face with another’s moral failures, it is very difficult to see our own and therefore impossible to forgive what our better goodness judges to be unforgivable.

Perhaps this blindness is why Pieter Bruegel set his painting of *The Massacre of the Innocents* in a village that looked, for all the world, like every village in the Netherlands during the late 1560s. “In Bruegel’s snowscape,” writes art critic Jonathan Jones, “a village is being turned upside down by soldiers who have come on behalf of Philip II, king of Spain, to punish heresy, to show what happens when provinces revolt. The armoured horsemen are a tight, compressed mass, black against white snow; they wait in patient menace while footsoldiers with pikes and battering rams bash in the doors of houses and drag villagers into the main square.” Without going into great detail, suffice it to say that the characters in the painting who claim divine sanction are the soldiers ruthlessly defending God’s truth against Calvinist heresy. The painting’s realism later caused an unknown hand to paint over “the infants being thrown about, slaughtered, mourned by screaming mothers...[with] packages and animals,” presumably

because the sight of such evil set in a place that was, at once, so recognizable, so close to home, was unbearable. Self-acknowledged sin is hard to come by.

I have been thinking a lot about how we might paint the story of the slaughter of the innocents in our own time and in a way that might help us acknowledge our own need for mercy. There would be no lone killer on the canvas with haunting eyes toting a Bushmaster .223 nor would the representative spokesperson for the NRA be portrayed as, say, Herod overseeing the massacre. Rather the painting would be set in the city of Brotherly Love, perhaps, with the streets clogged by a multitude representing an entire nation armed—each of us could paint in our own faces--and marching toward a schoolhouse in defense of the god to whom we offer our children as sacrifices. Paint their faces in too. Here the words of another poet are prescient. John Milton writes of the sacrifice of children to the fires of the God Moloch mentioned in Leviticus:

First *Moloch*, horrid king, besmear'd with blood
Of human sacrifice, and parents' tears,
Though for the noise of Drums and Timbrels loud
Their children's cries unheard, that pass'd through fire
To his grim idol.

Citing Milton, Garry Wills blogged on December 15th that the horror of the slaughter of the innocents this Advent cannot be blamed on one unhinged person. “It was the sacrifice we as a culture made, and continually make, to our demonic god. We guarantee that crazed man after crazed man will have a flood of killing power readily supplied to him. We have to make that offering, out of devotion to our Moloch, our god. The gun is our Moloch. We sacrifice children to him daily.” Wills goes on to say that the gun is “not a mere tool, a bit of technology, a political issue, a point of debate. It is an object of reverence. Devotion to it precludes interruption [of] the sacrifices it entails. Like most gods, it does what it will, and cannot be questioned....Adoration of Moloch permeates the country,” he concludes, “imposing a hushed silence as he works his

will. One cannot question his rites, even as the blood is gushing through the idol's teeth." Whether at the end of the barrel of a gun or with a little hand on a mouse that makes of our children virtual killers before they even enter kindergarten, we have sacrificed our children to a god whose violence and murderous ways have been sanctioned by our silence if not also by our outright obeisance.

This strikes me as unforgivable. To acknowledge the heinous sin of child sacrifice that is mine, I know only enough to beseech God for the mercy I do not deserve. "Mercy," I read on Christmas Day, "is the willingness to enter into the chaos of another." [James Keenan, S.J.] Even more than Luke, Matthew is telling us that God in Christ has had mercy upon us: has willingly entered our murderous chaos to dwell with us just there. This is how the unforgivable are forgiven: the evil in [each of us] is borne without vindictiveness by the victim, by the innocent one without sin whom we will deny, betray, abandon and hand over to death. It is not fair, nor is it necessary, that God show us such mercy, unless God be love.

Forgiveness is possible, says Niebuhr in the second place, if the impossibility of love is recognized not in you or in me, but in this vulnerable baby boy. "How?" you ask again. I repeat: as mercy enters into the chaos of another. Entitled simply "Forgiven," an article in today's New York Times Magazine tells of the murder of 19-year-old Ann Grosmaire by her 19-year-old boyfriend named Conor McBride who, when she was on her knees begging, shot her in the face. As Ann lay dying in the hospital, her face covered with bandages, intubated and unconscious, her father Andy "felt her say, 'Forgive him.' His response was immediate. 'No,' he said out loud. 'No way. It's impossible.... You're asking too much.' But Andy kept hearing his daughter's voice: 'Forgive him. Forgive him.'" Four days later and moments before the Grosmaires had to make the decision to remove Ann from life support, Andy remembers feeling a connection

between his daughter and Christ, her wounds and his. “Forgiveness,” the reporter writes, “runs deep in [the Grosmaire’s] creed. ““I realized it was not just Ann asking me to forgive Conor, it was Jesus Christ,’ Andy recalls.” ““Conor owed us a debt he could never repay,’ said Ann’s mother Kate before she was to visit Conor in prison and forgive him. “And releasing him from that debt would release us from expecting that anything in this world could satisfy us,”” anything except the mercy whose name they knew and who surely had entered into the chaos of their daughter’s murder.

How do you forgive the unforgivable? How do merely human beings bear hurt and hatred and evil without vindictiveness? In the aftermath of this Advent I know only enough to follow him who enters into our chaos still, into the little towns where the hopes and fears of all the years meet, into the city streets where the voices of wailing and lamentation are heard, parents weeping for their children, refusing to be consoled because they are no more. There I promise you, above your dark and dreamless sleep, you will hear him weeping too. For in him the impossibility of love has come down at Christmas and through his tears he has forgiven even unforgivable and unforgiving you. Thanks be to God!