



The Forgiveness Journey Ain't Easy

Vincent Powell Harris

One of the most difficult demands of the Christian life - one might even say the most difficult demand - is Jesus' insistence on forgiveness. It is clearly taught by Jesus and he obviously expects that those who follow him will exercise forgiveness. For instance, in Matthew 6:14 Jesus has this to say about forgiveness:

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your father forgive your trespasses.” (NRSV)

Witness also this exchange between Jesus and Peter again in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, verses 21 and 22:

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.” (NRSV)

Clearly we are called to forgive by Jesus, but Jesus is Jesus and we are who we are, finite, sinful and mystified people. So there is a problem. How can we ever hope to follow such an exacting and demanding command from Jesus?

I grew up Black in the Deep South in waning years of segregation. Born in 1952 two years before the Brown versus Board decision of 1954, three years before the murder of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi and the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, and five years before the desegregation of Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. As you can see, I was too young to understand how deeply these pivotal events affected the life of this country in general and the lives of African-Americans in particular.

My world was a cocooned one of church, school and family. I grew up during this period essentially protected from the harsh realities of racial discrimination by my parents who were determined to keep that aspect of life as far from me as possible. They did this to prevent my growth as a human being from being stunted by the perverse system of racial segregation and the attendant violence and hatred which were an ever present fact of life. They essentially wanted to keep my dreams alive and not have them terminated prematurely by the harsh realities of life for

Black people in the Deep South. My parents were forced to negotiate these harsh realities day in and day out in order to clothe, feed house and educate my sister and me and hoped, through their efforts, and the efforts of others, that things would indeed change someday. In the meantime, they had to cocoon, or better yet incubate my sister and I in order to save our souls from the perverse realities of racism, segregation and discrimination which would truncate our lives.

Yet, even my parents' heroic and sustained efforts to protect me did not always succeed. One day in 1958, after my mother and I had an enjoyable day of fishing, the dark cloud of racism and discrimination appeared quite unexpectedly for me for the first time. We stopped and entered a little place by the side of the road for a bite to eat. As we entered I immediately went to take a seat at the counter. I remember glancing up and seeing a sign which read: "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone." This meant nothing to me as I was only six years old at the time. However, the meaning became quite clear when the White woman behind the counter said to my mother, without any hesitation, "Tell him to get down from the stool. He can't sit there."

I was confused. Why couldn't I sit on the stool? I gave my mother a puzzled look and she gently said to the woman that if I could not sit on her stool then we would not be eating at this establishment. So we left with me confused and my mother trying to figure out how she was going to explain to me what had just happened. How do you tell a six year old kid who has just experienced his first taste of racial discrimination what the "facts of life" are for Black people?

I cannot remember exactly what my mother told me that day but I do know that there was no bitterness, only determination in her voice. There was no name calling or racial put-downs. That was not my mother's style. She simply told me in effect that this was the way things were, but they were going to change, and soon. "Obviously", she said, "this was an ignorant woman who did not deserve anger but forgiveness for being such a callous and insensitive human being."

This incident, and my mother's reaction to it, brings to mind Jesus' words from the cross in Luke 23:34: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Obviously for Jesus in Luke's Gospel, the political and religious authorities acted in ignorance. Their ignorance, coupled with the arrogance of power - always a dangerous and deadly combination - led to the death of an innocent man in the name of preserving the status quo. That Jesus could speak these words of forgiveness to the people who not only crucified him, but betrayed and denied him as well, speaks volumes. To paraphrase what some may consider an old and tired cliché: to get it wrong is indeed a part of the human condition, but forgiveness is of God.

What my mother did in forgiving this woman was to recognize this woman's ignorance without forgetting her humanity. Even though this woman obviously did not recognize either my mother's or my humanity, my mother did not allow this woman to diminish her intrinsic worth as a human being created in the image of God.

She also took the negative energy of this woman and tuned it into positive energy by teaching me how to respond to the ignorance and callousness of others. She taught me to take my anger at

injustice and oppression and to do something constructive with it rather than let it consume and destroy me. It was a hard lesson and one that I am still learning some fifty-five years later.

What I learned about the practice of forgiveness I learned from my mother.

QUESTIONS

The Reverend Vincent Powell Harris is Rector of St. George's Episcopal Church in Washington, DC. St. George's was founded in 1930 as an Episcopal Church for African-Americans at a time when White Episcopal churches didn't accept African Americans. He recounts a personal story from his childhood which underscores the force of segregation.

- What connections do you see between the young Vincent's parents' protective stance toward him and his sister and his understanding of forgiveness as an adult?
- What challenges did his mother face in explaining to the young Vincent what had happened at the lunch counter?
- What do you understand by the phrase "finite, sinful and mystified people"?
- What do you understand him to mean when he says "ignorance couple with the arrogance of power is always a dangerous and deadly combination"?
- If "to err is human, to forgive is divine," does this mean we are incapable of truly forgiving?
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