

OPENING TO THE SOFT SPOT - 4 ESCHEWING THE POWER OF RESENTMENT

(08/14/16)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 5:1-10, 21-26 (NRSV); 18:21-22 (RSV)

“Jesus said to him, ‘I tell you not seven times but seventy times seven.’” (Matthew 18:22)

In our worship this summer we are trying to become conscious of the extent to which our response to life is shaped by a quest for power.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to his church at Ephesus, counseled his parishioners to “put on the whole armor of God” in preparation for their battle with the powers and principalities of this world and the demonic forces of Satan. We have been contrasting Paul’s approach with that of Jesus, specifically as articulated in the Beatitudes.

Jesus counsels us to be vulnerable rather than invulnerable, to be weak rather than strong, to trust rather than try to control. When confronted by the Roman soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus eschewed the response suggested by Peter, who raised his sword against the soldiers and would have liked Jesus to call down legions of angels to destroy those who would hurt him. This is not Jesus’ way.

The urge to power is a basic human drive. Alfred Adler, an early psychoanalyst, said that we all struggle with feelings of inferiority. Adler believed our inferiority complex is rooted in the helplessness we experienced as infants. Adler said that the need for power is the most powerful drive of all; in fact, everything we do is directed toward this end. Our quest for material wealth and success is ultimately a quest for power. Our academic degrees may be a way of obtaining power in a culture that values education. Adler has a point. It is easy to believe that the more power we have over other people, the more control we have over our life situation, the happier we will be.

But this is not the spiritual path. It is not the path that Jesus taught and which he lived. In fact, the more power we have or try to have over other people and life, the more miserable we will be (and the more miserable other people will be). The thicker the armor we construct to keep us safe, to keep us from being wounded by other people and by life, the less we will experience true intimacy, the less we will experience true love. It has even been suggested that the opposite of love is not hate; it is power. Power and love cannot coexist.

This past month I attended a seminar on attachment styles and attachment pathology. It was a good workshop and I learned a lot, though commuting from Foxboro to Falmouth every day kind of wore me down. But that's not the point.

I find it amusing when in the course of a seminar I realize that the ideas that are being presented as new and cutting edge are not really that new. It is not unusual to hear ideas that were originally articulated by C. G. Jung, though the presenters almost never give him credit (maybe because they haven't read him). They present the ideas as if they invented them on their own. I also get a kick out of hearing something presented as new when I happen to know that Jesus taught it two thousand years ago. Modern psychologists rarely give Jesus credit (maybe because they haven't read him).

During this seminar, in the section on the development of post-formal metacognitive skills, it was suggested that we need to "take a wider perspective" in relationships and in life. This "wider perspective" sounded a lot like what we might call a spiritual perspective. We were told if we want to develop more secure attachments, more loving relationships, we need to learn how to forgive.

Once, just once, I would like to hear a presenter mention that Jesus not only taught this, he also lived it.

I don't mean to criticize psychology, especially that kind of modern psychology that is not grounded in classical psychoanalytic, humanistic, and existential theory, the kind of psychology that suffers from the *hubris* of believing that it is creating something brand new instead of simply rediscovering and repackaging ancient psychological or spiritual truths. For I find that this new psychology can be very helpful.

Many years ago I heard a saying: "Philosophy raises the fundamental questions of human existence; religion provides the answers; and psychology is the practical application of these answers." I am aware that my background in philosophy and religion helps me appreciate how our psychological insights can help us operationalize time-honored spiritual truths. So this morning, in the service of taking off another piece of our armor, we will be looking at the matter of forgiveness from both a psychological and a spiritual perspective.

Think of an example of some situation, some relationship in your life where you have been hurt and where you find yourself unable to let go of the hurt, where you harbor

a smoldering resentment that can quickly burst into flame. You may have been hurt verbally, emotionally, physically, or sexually; you may have been rejected or betrayed. If you can't find an example, I am very happy for you. However, I confess that I am suspicious that you either have a very poor memory or you are on heavy drugs.

We all know that it is important to forgive. We know that our resentments hurt us far more than they hurt the person who has wronged us or whom we believe has wronged us. Harboring resentment is like taking a drop of poison every day and mistakenly believing that we are hurting the other person. Forgiveness not only frees us from our inner hurt, it also frees us for relationship. Though, as we shall see, this can be scary.

Jesus tells us that we should forgive. He tells Peter that he should forgive his brother not seven times but seventy times seven. That is four hundred ninety, for those of you who do not have a calculator handy. But this number is not sacred. We don't have to stop when we get to four hundred ninety-one. Jesus is simply saying that we should forgive each other much more often than we do.

Psychologists who treat people who have been abused or traumatized tell us that healing is a process, and that forgiveness comes at the end rather than the beginning of this process. First, you need to overcome the defense of repression and become conscious of what was done to you. It is important to share this with another person, perhaps a therapist, or, if you cannot say it to write it. Second, you need to become aware of all the feelings that are tied to the abuse: feelings like anger, hurt, terror, and shame.

The third step is to understand how this hurt, this abuse, this trauma has shaped your relationships. You need to touch the underlying fear. This fear is basically a fear of vulnerability. If you become vulnerable in relationships, you may be hurt again. And so you put on a coat of armor. The fourth step is to become conscious of how your defense system has given rise to an unmet need. This unmet need is the need for love, the need for intimacy. As long as we cling to the hurt and resentment, as long as we try to ensure that we will never be hurt again, we will be unable to give or receive love. And that is a serious loss.

Finally, the metacognitive approach encourages us to look at the larger context. We try to understand what was going on in the abuser's mind, in the person's psyche when he/she hurt us. Understanding can help us to forgive. However, this needs to come

at the end of the process, not at the beginning. The affirmation of our common humanity, the affirmation that we all have a shadow, the affirmation that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God leads to healing. If we force it, if it comes too early, it is cheap forgiveness. Cheap forgiveness not only does not heal relationships, it makes it impossible for us to experience the peace that comes from true healing.

Thich Nhat Hanh suggested that we should hold the person who has hurt or abused us in our mind. Then we should ask if we would like to trade places with that person, if we would want to be that person. When we discover that the answer to this is no, we may come to feel some compassion for the abuser. This compassion can help us move toward the forgiveness that sets both of us free.

During the seminar I suddenly realized that our reluctance to forgive is actually tied to the quest for power. The inability or unwillingness to forgive may function as the armor that keeps us from feeling vulnerable, that keeps us from ever being hurt again. As strange as it sounds, the wound, which we would commonly think of as a vulnerable spot, can be used as armor to protect us.

Think about it. If I am in a relationship with a loved one, perhaps a family member, and that person has hurt me, my instinctive response is fight or flight—to repay hurt for hurt, or to pull out of the relationship so that the other can never hurt me again. Can you see how this is actually an attempt to regain the power position? As long as I hold onto the hurt, the person cannot get close to me. If I am stubborn, and if the person values the relationship, I can make him/her crawl. I have the power to decide whether to open my heart to the other person or not. So in a strange way, I am both the victim of the abuse, hurt, or offense, and I am also the one in control.

In forgiving the other seventy times seven, we are keeping our heart open; we are making ourselves vulnerable. However, I am not suggesting that we resubmit to a verbally, emotionally, or physically abusive relationship. This would make us complicit in the abuse. We need healthy boundaries in our relationships. However, especially with those whom we love, we need to take the risk of letting go of our hurt, our anger, our resentments and make ourselves vulnerable once again to them and to life.

Jesus calls us to take the risk of forgiving. He calls us to eschew the power that comes from holding onto our hurts, from holding onto and nurturing our resentments,

from treasuring the self-righteous feeling of being wronged coupled with the sense of security that comes from being in the power position. He encourages us to take off the armor that we have consciously or unconsciously constructed, perhaps from early childhood, that armor that keeps us from being hurt but that also keeps us from experiencing the deep intimacy, the deep love that we need to both give and receive.

Jesus tells us that the abuse, the traumas, the hurts, the wounds to our self-esteem that we have experienced do not need to define us, and they will not define us if we can experience and then extend true forgiveness. After all, he forgave Peter who denied him, Judas who betrayed him, and the soldiers who nailed him to the cross.

If we can do as Jesus did, if we can let the hurts of our lives enter through the soft spot in our hearts, our relationships will be healed, our hearts will be enlightened, and we will experience the wonderful peace that comes to those who dwell in the kingdom of God.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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