

## God is *Not* An American, Act 1: Reflections on Forgiveness as a Communal Act

May these words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight,  
O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

I'd like to preface this sermon by revisiting some what our pastor Laura Ruth mentioned last week regarding the Lenten theme, the slow work of forgiveness, specifically that we recognize that each of us has a particularly journey toward forgiveness and that we respect where we are. Therefore, in the service of loving disclosure, I see this sermon as geared to those who are often challenged by forgiveness for whatever reasons, but who long for the day when they are no longer in a painful relationship with particular offenses. And for those of you who have a more comfortable relationship to forgiveness, I hope that these words will encourage you to go even deeper.

One of the things that most fascinates me about Christianity is its ability to critique surrounding culture—its capacity to be prophetic and to tell us where we're missing the mark, as societies and individuals. This was never more apparent to me than when I began meditating on this sermon—God is *Not* An American: Reflections on Forgiveness as a Communal Act.

As the words for this sermon began to take shape, it was clear to me that in order to say something meaningful about forgiveness, to wade in the deep waters, if you will, I would need to reckon with just how much being an American shapes my views.

You see, as Americans, the role of the individual holds such power, idolatrous, some might say, so much so that it's easy to view forgiveness as solely and individual pursuit. I forgive or I don't forgive. You forgive or you don't forgive. As an individual, it is my right, as it is yours, right? Well, yes...and yet there's more to it.

Of course the problems comes when we encounter those prickly biblical verses that unequivocally talk about the notion that we have to forgive if we are to be forgiven. And here's a fascinating biblical factoid, one that was recently brought to my attention—there's only one place in the entire bible where we pray for God to imitate us—and that place is the Lord's Prayer, where we ask God to forgive us as we forgive others.

Talk about a tall order!

At this point, it is perfectly human to say, yes....but, which is an entirely understandable response given the traumas and wounding so many of us have faced—things that haunt

and scar us even as we attempt to live abundant lives. For these experiences, forgiveness seems formidable and utterly impossible, which begs the question, what, if anything, can we do?

In a gorgeous short film entitled “Salvation from the Inside Out,” Father Richard Rohr is asked the pointed question, “what is God saving?” And he provides an answer that, in my opinion, is very helpful for us in this exploration: he states that “God is saving history.” God is restoring all things. Moreover, he adds that while God spoke through particular individuals throughout history, it was all for the sake of the collective, be it Israel or the Church. In other words, we are part of something much bigger than ourselves, and that something is a vast reservoir of spiritual power that we can tap into.

Unfortunately, this is also where being an American can be harmful to our spiritual health, for if we see ourselves only as individuals, meaning that we don’t see ourselves as connected to a communion of saints, and if salvation is solely about me getting into heaven, then the journey is a decidedly lonely one, and all my crosses are mine to bear alone, including and especially my capacity to forgive.

The good news is that Christianity is a **We** faith: **We** individually are part of a much larger body, the body of Christ. In this corporate body **We** are called to lift up one another and bear each other’s burdens. **We** are called to pray for one another. And it is here, I would boldly assert, that **We** are called to pray for our collective capacity to forgive and to be forgiven, and that what **We** do here on a weekly basis, in our confession and pardon, and our recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. These practices are key for the reason that even when I don’t have the individual strength or capacity to forgive and/or to experience forgiveness, you the Church model it for me—you become Forgiveness and Grace Incarnate.

In spite of my belief that American individualism is often antithetical to a soulful, prophetic Christianity, because of its scandalous worship of the individual, I find myself stopping short of asserting that the individual has absolutely no role to play (*call it the 2% of me that has Republican tendencies*). Rather, I would like to suggest that the individual can play a vital role in a very humble way just by the smallest of intentions and actions, which can have a mighty impact, something I call the “trim tab effect.”

I learned about the trim tab a few years ago when I read Rabbi Rami Shapiro’s excellent book “Recovery—the Sacred Art: The 12 Steps as Spiritual Practice.” As he describes it, “the trim tab is used in boats...to stabilize the craft without having to control the craft itself...they are tiny mechanisms attached to a ship’s rudder.” He then goes on further

to state that “because of the great pressure of the sea against the ship’s rudder, turning the rudder itself is arduous if not impossible. But the small size of the trim tab allows one to adjust it easily.”<sup>i</sup>

As someone who didn’t grow up in a nautical environment, this metaphor required some work initially, but I recalled that Christianity also uses images of small, subversive things that have profound impacts—take for example the mustard seed of faith moving mountains and leavening that is likened to the kingdom of God. The essential point to be made, as Rabbi Shapiro summarizes, is that “the message of the trim tab is not that we are in control, but that the changes needed to steer us on the right path are little ones, doable ones.”

And what might those little, doable actions look like in the realm of forgiveness? I think 12-step spirituality can help to inform us here, in the practice of willingness (as opposed to willfulness). *Willingness might best be described as that practice which allows for the possibility of transformation in OUR relationships to people, places, and things.*

However, I know that this is easier said than done. In my case, I have been known to say to my dear friends that there are moments in my life when I can’t seem to get to being willing, so I just find myself praying for the willingness to be willing, and that’s good enough at the time. I sometimes go even further to say that if I can’t be willing to be willing, then I ask for the willingness to be willing to be willing! I trust that you get my point, because there are infinitely layers of willingness [and we could be here forever]. Interestingly enough, it is in these moments that I learn that willingness is less about my will/ego [epitomized by a no thank you, I’ll do it myself attitude] and more about Grace [epitomized by, thank you, for opening up the space for me to see things differently].

In our journey thus far, we have explored the experience of forgiveness as being embedded in our faith community that is moving toward the heart of God, that we as individuals can take minute steps even if just to open ourselves up to the possibility of forgiveness, all of which are critical. Now, in my final observation I’d like us to consider today’s gospel reading, which contains the oft-used, controversial phrase “born again.” In the reading Nicodemus is told that he must be born again, born from above, in order to see God’s household or kingdom and experience eternity.

Once again, I suspect that particular strains of American individualism, and Protestant fundamentalism, color these passages, and not for the better. What I’d like to offer you is another way to understand the experience of being born again—that it is a process of being drawn into a deeper humanity, of shedding the False self, of allowing the Ultimate to transform our ways of seeing and being in the world, and comprehending the

profound interconnectedness of all things (which just happens to be the opposite of sin, separation and alienation).

This I believe with all my heart, soul and might, is the fertile soil that allows for the possibility and process of forgiveness to happen, but it is often slow, arduous, laborious work, and that's OK.....for two reasons: one, because we are assured that God who begins a good work in us will be faithful to complete it, and two, because the Universe has all the time in the world, and that's a very, very Good Thing!

So be it!

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<sup>i</sup> Shapiro, Rami. *Recovery, The Sacred Art: The Twelve Steps as Spiritual Practice*. Skylight Paths, 2009. Woodstock, VT.