



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

BIKE LESSON

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Christianity

Luke 6.43-49

No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person, out of the good treasure of the heart, produces good, and the evil person, out of evil treasure, produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

Hindu Tradition

Bhagavad Gita 6.30-32

*He who sees me in everything
and everything within me
will not be lost to me, nor
will I ever be lost to him.*

*He who is rooted in oneness
realizes that I am
in every being: wherever
he goes, he remains in me.*

*Wherever he sees all beings as equal
in suffering or in joy
because they are like himself,
he has grown perfect in practice and meditation.*

(translated by Stephen Mitchell)

Martin Marty tells the story about a parish intern who was emphasizing the theme of the scriptures for the day with two signs: "Welcome" and "Keep Out."

"Is there a welcome sign on the front of the church?" he asked.

"No," said the kids.

"Well, welcome signs don't mean much. It's the way we treat people that makes them feel welcome or not." Do you welcome people here, especially other children?"

"Yes," was the resounding response.

"Is the welcome word something you'd use if someone different from you, say someone from another culture was here?"

"Yes," the children answered universally. They were too young to have learned discrimination and prejudice, Marty comments.

"What about someone who is poorer than you or who dresses kinda funny?" the intern asked.

Again, none of the children pointed to the 'keep out' sign. They were all sure they'd welcome them.

"Let's make it harder," said the intern. "Would you say 'welcome' if someone who had stolen your bike came to church?"

And the answer was a unanimous 'NO.' Keep Out was the sign they pointed to.

"Didn't you hear the words of Jesus about forgiveness?" he asked. "Jesus wants you to act differently than other people. Remember, it's all about forgiveness." he said naively.

"No, it's all about the bike!" a child piped up in tones that mingled hurt with anger. The adults were now leaning forward to see where this important lesson was going. But there had been a failure of communication, Marty comments. The intern was picturing a scenario in which the thief had been apprehended, had repented, was fined, and the bicycle returned. He was asking if the children can forgive and then welcome such a person.

The children heard it differently: in their imagination the kid who had stolen the bike had not been apprehended, the bike had not been returned, and showing up at church would not be welcomed. Though we say it's all about welcome and forgiveness, the child who spoke up made a point that cannot be easily ignored: sometimes it's all about the bike.

Trust the child to know better than to dispense what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace.' In the framework of the way the child pictured the scenario, there was to be no superficial and smiling 'judge not' or "let him that is without sin cast the first stone" or "let's all be nice." ('Bike Lesson', *Christian Century*, Oct 23-Nov5, 2002, p.55)

In another theological conversation about a bike, an astute child announced that she'd been praying for a bike. "But," she said, "I know that God doesn't respond to such selfish requests, so I stole a bike and asked for forgiveness."

Both stories raise an important tension we all confront at one time or another: is forgiveness realistic when the crime is great and the losses significant? Answers and solutions are elusive. Sometimes it **is** all about forgiveness. When genuine remorse is offered and amends are made, differences and tensions must be set aside for a larger purpose; forgiveness is about cleaning the slate to move forward. Sometimes it **is** all about forgiveness, when someone who has wronged us repents, and changes their ways; to withhold forgiveness would be to punish vindictively and unnecessarily.

And sometimes it's about the bike. There are times when forgiveness is beyond our ability, when the hurt is so deep and the pain so intense and our lives significantly ruined because of someone else's intentional evil perpetrated against us. And when it's about the bike, then it's all about the bike and it's important to own up to it. A false or forced forgiveness has no integrity.

Forgiveness that is only lip-service is pretense and bravado, where the words are spoken out of obligation, but the heart and mind have not followed suit. It is like bad fruit coming from a bad tree. This happens often when I'm with my grandsons. The command to "tell him you're sorry" results in a perfunctory "I'm sorry" but accomplishes very little by way of changed behavior.

There are twin dangers in false forgiveness. First, we refuse to recognize the need for appropriate rage and expressed anger, suppressing these in favor of expected religious niceties and false pride of condescension. And secondly, . . . forgiving too quickly may placate a vital grief that is necessary for health, and perhaps suppress a genuine forgiveness at some later time.

Our faith journey will not always have clear-cut answers. Jesus said forgive seventy times seven, but I don't think he was asking us to forgive and forget in these situations where it is all about the bike. What Jesus does ask us to do is to send our roots down into the soil of integrity and justice, of peace and truth, valuing relationship more than being right.

We bear fruit and act according to the attitude of our heart, the way we think, and the value systems we build over a lifetime of successes and failures. While sometimes it is about the bike, Jesus points out that we can't offer cheap grace any more than we can get figs from thorn bushes. And when forgiveness is the order of the day, we are branches of a vine that produces excellent grapes for wine that, when shared, facilitates community.

The Bhagavad-Gita reminds us of the panentheistic nature of the divine:

He who sees me in everything
and everything within me
will not be lost to me, nor
will I ever be lost to him.

He who is rooted in oneness
realizes that I am
in every being: wherever
he goes, he remains in me.

Wherever he sees all beings as equal
in suffering or in joy
because they are like himself,
he has grown perfect in practice and meditation.

We come to this communion table to renew our relationship with God and the world; not to find answers or solutions. We come to this table, individually and collectively, to center in a holy, unconditional love that is grounded in the universe and everything in it. We come to this table to remember that life is complex, relationships are complicated, even as they are rewarding and beautiful. We come to this table to embrace the paradox that it's all about forgiveness and it's all about the bike, for we live in the tension of evolving faith still in process. We come to this table to recognize that we are nothing more than human, but nothing less than human, either; rooted in God's love, pollinated by God's grace, bearing good fruit. Amen.

—Gary L. McCann