

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 6th, 2020

Readings: Exodus 12:1-14, Psalm 149, Romans 13:8-14 Matthew 18:15-20.

**Walking on Eggshells:
The Place of Forgiveness in Freedom**

Introduction

To speak of forgiveness at all is difficult. To speak of forgiveness between two people is more so. To speak of forgiveness in a community and between communities the most difficult of all. In fact, there are not a few, many, who would say that forgiveness has no place in social dynamics, in community relationships. Still others would suggest the opposite – that forgiveness is a must – but to actually explain it, to give meaning to it in something as complex as society, challenges the intellect, defies the imagination. This has pretty much been one of the ‘big questions’ I have attempted to think through over the years in the light of my experience in public affairs and social movements. Does forgiveness have a place in society? If so, how?

So, let’s begin with the Hebrew and Gospel readings for today, and then pose some questions that arise from them.

The Readings

The reading from Exodus, as I have pointed out in the commentary offers a good beginning point for our thought. The story is well known and concerns the establishment of Passover when the Hebrews, who are about to realize their liberation through Yahweh, receive the divine words, *This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD.*

The point is that in Israel’s history of Exodus, ritual, faith ritual, religious ritual is to have a liberating purpose, ritual is to be a mechanism for remembering, for making present again and again – that is what “to remember” means – the freedom that they are called to take up, to embrace as a people of God. Hebrew community is to be the paramount sign, the preeminent sacrament of freedom.

When we turn to the Gospel, we hear of a very different situation, but one that also deals with the question of freedom. Here, through the memory and example of Jesus, through whom *his* forgiveness facilitates *our* freedom as human beings, the issue bends upon the problem of the relationship between forgiveness and freedom. Matthew is sharply aware that the Christian community, is as any other, prone to be preoccupied, obsessed with rules and conformity. He sees the danger where the Christian community becomes just another draconian, authoritarian place, which in the name of Jesus crushes freedom, forgetting the place of forgiveness, generosity and tolerance. In this reading, Matthew sets the bar very high for the community as one that must patiently nurture and restore those considered to be offenders, outsiders. The spirit of forgiveness – of *apheimi*, release, guarantees an open, free community. Forgiveness is the guarantor of freedom.

When we join these two stories together, we find a wonderful insight: The nature of the community of God is this: that it is free and forgiving. *Freedom facilitates forgiveness and forgiveness facilitates freedom.*

The World of Reality

But the world is complicated and we can sometimes become easily confused when it comes to this profound human value of forgiveness. We need to be astute in understanding the relationship between forgiveness and freedom.

Let me move to a complicated situation that was repeated time and time again in many countries through the 1980s through to the 1990s which helps us understand the place and power of forgiveness properly understood, in the birth and rebirth of freedom.

All repressive regimes finally take a fall. Argentina in 1983, Chile in 1989, El Salvador in 1992 and South Africa in 1991, to name but a few. In each case, in different ways and to differing extents, amnesty was offered to the military and police forces, implicated in the horrific systemic violence of many years' duration. It was always defended and enacted as an expression of forgiveness offered by the state. It was in effect the state forgiving the state, the state releasing the state from accountability for its actions through its armed forces. And yet to 'compatibilize' amnesty with forgiveness was a misrepresentation, a lie: they were not the same thing at all.

Amnesty – a legal construct – acquitted, exempted, exonerated the perpetrators from any responsibility for their heinous actions against hundreds of thousands of people. Forgiveness on the other hand reset the direction of society altogether, through three fundamental steps: first, that the truth be heard; second, the offering of a genuine opportunity to the armed forces and the police to acknowledge the criminality of their actions; and third the opportunity, the necessity of offering penance, to be held accountable for their actions. Only through these stages – all initiated through the offer of forgiveness by the victims – could there be any chance for restoration and renewal. While amnesty trivialized the human rights abuses, forgiveness demanded they be taken seriously.

But what was the theology, anthropology, sociology and psychology behind this necessity of forgiveness? It is this: only through the offer of forgiveness from the victims, could the perpetrators begin the journey of seeing themselves as broken, sinful people amid broken, sinful institutions. Only through the *weight of forgiveness*– and I use that term after considerable thought – could these societies ever have a chance of being renewed, resurrected. The alternative was to continue as violent states, some of which have in fact continued to be so.

Surely, we in Australia have something to learn about the theological, philosophical and political power of forgiveness with regard to our indigenous communities. Of course, we have investigated the brutality of the “stolen” generations, we have offered an apology to indigenous Australia. We have not exonerated, amnestied or forgiven ourselves as has happened elsewhere when human and civil rights have been obliterated. But, nor have we really listened to the truth of the indigenous stories and taken them to heart. We have not opened ourselves to the weight of receiving forgiveness and ultimately confessing our

collective sin. Karl Rahner's observation was correct: "Only the one who has been forgiven, understands his own broken-ness".