

Forgiveness—Bargaining and Creativity

27 March 2011

David D. Zaworski

Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 2:1-12

PRAY PRAY PRAY PRAY PRAY PRAY PRAY

Bargaining. I'll forgive him *if* he apologizes. I'll forgive her *if* she just listens and really hears me. I'll forgive *if* he suffers for what he did, *if* she admits she's wrong, *if* he promises to never do that again. I'll forgive, *if*...

This is the third sermon in our series on forgiveness. Last week I gave a quick overview of forgiveness as a process with five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. This way of thinking about forgiveness comes from the work of Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn (*Don't Forgive Too Soon: Extending the Two Hands that Heal*, Paulist Press 1997). Last week we looked in more detail at denial and anger. This week we'll look at the bargaining stage. And again at the outset let me be clear that this is a model, a way of labeling and getting a handle on the common elements of a process that is always particular and unique to each person and situation. This approach lives in the space that one of my seminary professors, Widick Schroeder, described with the phrase, "the grandeur and misery of typologies." Models of any reality can be very powerful aides to greater insight, clarity, and thoughtful action. But they also always limit and distort our view of the real, full experience being modeled.

So then, as we saw last week each of these stages is a potential pitfall, a place we can get stuck, but each also has something to offer us. Bargaining, any kind of bargaining, is about figuring out what's important to us. (Is this antique chair really \$300 important to me? Maybe \$200 important? \$250? Sold!) The Bible has some interesting stories about bargaining and about what's important. Abraham bargains with God for the sake of the people of Sodom (Gen.18:23ff). Moses argues with God to preserve the Hebrew people after they worship the golden calf (Ex.32:7ff). Interestingly, in both cases the bargaining strategy of Abraham and Moses is to make clear what's at stake for God, and in each case what's at stake is God's very identity as a just and trustworthy deity.

And in our first reading today we have the fascinating back and forth between Jesus and the devil. This is all about being clear about what's important, being clear about boundaries—what's appropriate to us as people and what is left to God, being clear about the truth of one's own way forward.

The devil says, "You're hungry. *If* you are the Son of God, go ahead and eat." Jesus directly answers the obvious temptation—he is hungry, but, "One does not live by bread alone..." His physical discomfort is not the most important thing. Nor is it the real thrust of the temptation—that's in the setup, "*If* you are the Son of God." The devil is tempting Jesus to both doubt his identity, and to act out of that doubt to make a too-concrete, and so limiting, assertion about who he is, e.g. one who works a miracle—stones to bread—to serve his own need. This more subtle temptation then becomes blatant: *If* you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple. "Are you really sure who you are? Why not just *be* sure—and show everyone else too? Jump! and let the angels catch you." Jesus says, no.

And finally, "You could rule the world, just worship me," says the devil. And Jesus sends the tempter packing with a clear statement of who he, Jesus, is and what it is that really matters: "Worship the Lord your God and serve God only." Jesus is God's son, heart and soul, and that has nothing to do with power and privilege and everything to do with service.

Jesus and the devil are bargaining about Jesus' identity. When we are hurt or wronged, that's an attack on our identity, our sense of who we are. The bargaining stage expresses our need to re-assert ourselves, to have our individual worth acknowledged. It can help us clarify appropriate boundaries and sometimes can open us to creativity that will lift us toward fuller humanity and deeper relationships.

And as with other stages in forgiveness, attending to our bargaining can help us understand our real needs and act to move through the process. Let me draw on the Linns again this week. They ask and answer, “What’s healthy about bargaining?” Bargains give voice to our anger—the ifs can express what we’re still upset about, what we need for healing to move forward. Our bargains can express our boundaries, the limits we need to expect from others to protect our human dignity. They invite the one who has wronged us to face the consequences of his or her actions. They may reveal a creative way of non-violent engagement that opens up new possibilities for restored relationships.

We miss out on all this when we too quickly dismiss our bargaining. We may tell ourselves we shouldn’t be so needy. We may assume we can’t get what we want, so we don’t stay with the bargaining to look for what we really need and creative ways to get it. We may make bargains that are weak and don’t hold any real accountability. We may tell ourselves that if the other person doesn’t come through on our “if” then we’ll never get over being hurt. None of this is helped when those around us tell us as Christians we should just forgive unconditionally, or urge us to be passive—giving up on resolutions—or vindictive—pushing to hurt the other person back.

But other people can be a great help at this stage. First, you know this from last week, “Love me just as I am without trying to fix me or change me.” They can listen and help us know we’re heard. These things rebind our broken sense of self. Reaffirming our worth can give us a solid place to stand as we identify and reinforce healthy boundaries. Our support community can help us come through to creative solutions by just listening, receiving, even our most outlandish “ifs”—attending to those bargains, those things we say we want, until they reveal the deep feelings and real needs we have. And for our part, we can hang out with people who do have healthy boundaries. We can look for ways that they can help us meet our real needs and free us from depending on the person who’s just wronged us for some particular response. Sometimes, with the support of community, the best we can do is wait, receive their love, and slowly come to a place of letting go of desires for some change in the other person, some change in the externals of the situation.

Finally, the way through our bargaining is to identify our real needs, to do what we can to meet them, and then to come each in our own time to a place of trust, to an understanding of ourselves and our deepest human identity as beloved children of God.

The friends of the paralytic were determined and persistent. They had set themselves the work of placing their need—which was the need of their friend—squarely in front of Jesus. They were not dissuaded by the crowd—that may even have encouraged them; it affirmed that this Jesus was indeed someone amazing. They dig through the roof and lower the paralytic down into the packed room, right in front of Jesus. Just pause for a moment and picture that scene—it’s got to have been a showstopper.

And notice they didn’t call down any instructions to Jesus. They did their part and trusted Jesus to know and do his part.

And Jesus goes straight to the heart of what is most important, most needed. Right there, before the crowd Jesus declares to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven.” —whatever the outward circumstances, in God’s eyes you are right with God; you are God’s beloved; nothing you have done or failed to do can stop God from loving you.

The change in the externals is almost an afterthought. Get up and walk. Forgiveness can be that way too—doing our work, receiving the support of friends, trusting, we can come to a place of acceptance and in that place discover that we too have taken up our beds, our hurts are healed, and we can walk into each new day that God gives. Amen.