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Chapel Semons

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CHAPEL SERMONS

The following sermonettes were originally delivered to the students of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Both were received with special favor by the congregation and recommended to the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY for publication. We are pleased to share them with our reading audience.

THE FORGIVENESS OF GOD

MARK 2:1-12

In a discussion of world affairs a theologian suggested, "We have tried everything else in the attempt to solve the problems of the world, perhaps it is high time that we should try love."

Certainly a beautiful world is envisioned in such a world of love. Curses no longer reecho across no-man's land; the hand of vengeance no longer pours arsenic into the neighbor's wine; the sickly moans of starving children no longer issue from squalid huts. Instead a beautiful world of songs and kindness and kisses emerges.

Basic to such a world of love is forgiveness. It is the magic which silences cries of an outraged wife ringing in the ears of the displaced person. It is the process whereby the haggard faces of children staring through nightmarish barbed wires blend into blackness. It is the food which the peasant, driven from his acre, places on the plates of his starving children. It is the ointment smeared on wounded characters.

Surely such an approach to forgiveness is blasphemy and forces us to ask with the scribes whether forgiveness is possible at all. However, once we have reached the vantage point of the scribes' precipice we are apt, in our weakness, to leap into the abyss and despair of forgiveness.

Though we can't begin to deal with forgiveness in one brief chapel talk, we shall try, however, to place it on the proper ramp.

What is an essential characteristic of for-

giveness? There is, of course, the approach which equates forgiveness with the evasion of punishment. This is typified by the freshman who runs to the dean's office just before his offense is detected, hoping for remission of penalty by hurried confession.

Is this the prime purpose, or any purpose of forgiveness? Is it a way of breaking the inner connection which seems to exist between crime and punishment? This certainly is not the approach of the apostle Paul. He lived in a world of forgiveness, yet he certainly did not expect to escape the consequences of his past misdeeds. The confession of his activities in persecution is balanced as a matter of course by the statement, "I suffered more abundantly than they all," and still more heroically, "I glory in tribulation."

Is forgiveness, then, a psychological attitude of the subject? Certainly there is neither joy nor value in nourishing bitter thoughts of hurt and hatred. Forgiveness, then, would be a way of escaping from a world in which even the beautiful ultimately becomes loathsome and obnoxious. Such an approach to forgiveness, though of tremendous therapeutic value, can be nothing more than an emotional catharsis.

Is forgiveness a way of beginning anew? Everyone has been just about equally dishonest and mean to everyone else, so let's quit the old game without any hard feelings and start a new one. Or stated differently, in some areas of Europe and Asia, to say nothing of the United States, the evils of centuries cannot possibly be righted, so let's preach the Gospel of forgiveness and love and make a new start. Though this approach is the only way out of some situations, I must say that I am often nauseated by the words of forgiveness, sprinkled like so much sickening perfume over a congregation on Sunday, when everyone knows that the same old vi-

cious game will be played on Monday. To me there is no greater travesty on forgiveness!

Is the act of forgiveness a way of restoring that which has been ruined by nastiness, egocentricity, and sin? Is it a way of restoring the rogue to his pristine purity oblivious of the wounds which some of the victims of his words and deeds are still bearing?

Such an approach simply does not appear to be true. Even though there be no law of cause and effect, observations of contingency indicate that words and actions simply intertwine with the pattern of reality and are never removed. Even when remembered no more, the past exists in the present.

The slogan "forgive and forget" practically equates the two ideas. But if forgetting is equivalent to forgiving, then the greatest crimes are never forgiven. Besides, what's wrong with a good memory?

But someone will protest, That is not what we mean. When we say "forget," we mean "do not retaliate." Let the scoundrel sleep without fear that he will be dealt with as he has dealt. If that is forgiveness, then the weak and the oppressed in effect are forgiving the strong and the oppressor.

While there may be some pedagogical values in the anthropopathic concepts of forgiveness just caricatured, the consternation and awe of the scribes remains. Man cannot forgive or even understand the process. Man may set aside punishment, restore the outcast, forego vengeance, but he cannot obliterate a past act.

Only God forgives, and He forgives only in Jesus Christ. Every word of forgiveness in the Old Testament, every blotting out of rebellion and wickedness presupposed the Christ event and is therefore prophecy in a unique sense.

For forgiveness is an act of God in Jesus Christ. It is the act whereby the old passes away in the death of Good Friday and the new arises in the Easter event. It is not a

patching up or restitution of the old but the evolvment of the new in continuity with the old.

Every statement of forgiveness we make is a proclamation of Christ. It is an identification of the person forgiven, as well as ourselves, with Jesus in His death and resurrection.

The act of forgiveness is an act of faith. It is the acceptance of Christ's death and resurrection not only in the historical reality of two thousand years ago but the acceptance of the church as the body of Christ in the contemporary world. It is the belief in the dynamic activity of the Spirit whereby Christ is formed from all sorts and conditions of men in the existence of today. It is the eschatological faith which sees the evil and the old dying everywhere and the holy and new becoming all in all.

Forgiveness is not primarily a moral act on our part but the assertion of conviction. It is faith in the new reality of Christ which emerges wherever the Gospel is preached. The act of forgiveness is both the determination and assurance, grasped dimly by sight but plainly by faith, that the old is passing and all things are new.

Forgiveness, then, is not merely proclaimed in words. Forgiveness is a way of life. Forgiveness is service whereby the needy are helped, the sick visited, the oppressed relieved, the rejected accepted. It is every word and act which involves us in the conviction of new life in Christ.

For the mystery of Christ in the world is the Alpha and Omega of forgiveness.

E. L. LUEKER

CREDIBILITY

ACTS 26:8

Let me speak to you on a great question which points to the perennial credibility gap. The apostle Paul asked all present on that memorable occasion to give an account of

their unbelief. Present were Festus, the Roman governor; King Agrippa and Bernice, his wife; the military tribunes or generals of the Roman occupation force; the prominent men of the city. It was an occasion of great pomp—no one of public importance could miss the event. Clearly, the apostle Paul faced a very knowledgeable audience. He addresses himself to the guest of honor, King Agrippa, in the context of their common religion, in which Paul had lived as a member of the Pharisees. "And now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers. . . . And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?"

Notice that Paul asks his question of everyone present—Jew and Gentile. The argument is this: To believe in God necessitates the affirmation that God raises the dead and all its entailing consequences. Here opens the great and perennial credibility gap.

Why have people thought it incredible that God raises the dead? Let me offer this answer: The great credibility gap exists also in our time because people insist on being realists within an exceedingly narrow horizon. The marvelous world of our childhood is overcome by a system of indoctrination which limits our vision to what man can do or experience. We are given a humanistic education to shape our minds and hearts for the enduring conviction that man and nature are the measure of things. Nothing human is alien to us, and all possibilities are human possibilities for us, religion included. The grand affirmation of our Christian tradition, learned and rehearsed in childhood, has become the poetry and myth of a "world come of age," echoed in published themes on secular, religionless Christianity and subjectivistic ethics.

Our young people in our schools as well as in their places of work appear to be fully occupied with their private or public pursuits

of happiness. The news that God raises the dead does not turn them on at all. Death is not in their plans. So, who needs to be raised from the dead? Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow—why, tomorrow never comes! How does one communicate the Gospel under such conditions? Must we all pose as subjectivistic hippies and join the show in the hope of slipping in now and then a judicious aside about the God who raises the dead? Shall we contrive "happenings" in order to make the Gospel "happen"? How does one speak to people of whom the apostle Peter wrote: "First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation?'" (2 Peter 3:3-4)

By disposition and training we are all humanistic naturalists. We assert *ourselves* when we paint our own, private picture of reality even while we read or hear the Gospel. There is no room in it for the "many infallible proofs" (Acts 1:3) of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Behold," the prophet Isaiah quotes the Lord, "I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (43:19). But the "sign of Jonah" (Matt. 12:39) is not perceived. Instead we prefer to invent questions for God and His Word which cannot be answered but which plainly demonstrate that our erudition is not naive.

Some call themselves secularists. I wish they were Christian secularists, because the Christian takes creation very seriously. The Lord made it and redeemed it. I wish they were Christian naturalists in the sense of the apostle Paul's statement: "But it is not the spiritual which is first, but the natural, and then the spiritual" (1 Cor. 15:46). I wish they were Christian humanists who see a grander destiny for mankind than the tawdry, prison-like utopia to be achieved by bloody

revolution. I wish all of us who hear the Word of God would ask what sort of persons we ought to be in lives of holiness and godliness. (2 Peter 3:11)

Instead, the apostle Paul asks us: "Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" If we seriously face up to our own credibility gap on hearing the Gospel as Festus did, we may understand the Roman governor when he said in a loud voice: "Paul, you are mad; your great learning is turning you mad." But Paul said: "I am not mad, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner." (Acts 26:24-26)

Indeed, it was not done in a corner! But

the great credibility gap remains, perhaps even among us, and shows itself in the way we talk and live and do our work. It is revealed in the general decline of Christian commitment among our people. It is exposed in the growing reluctance to hear the great command, "Go, and make disciples of all nations." When our Lord admonished the disciples to persevere steadfastly until the end of the age, He also asked them a haunting question: "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:19)

The great credibility gap is not overcome or bridged by merely inspecting it. It is overcome and bridged by hearing the Gospel faithfully, "for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe." (Rom. 1:16)

RICHARD KLANN