

9/11 and Forgiveness

It appears religiously naïve and politically offensive even to raise the question of forgiveness on 9/11. But, the coincidence of two biblical readings on forgiveness this Sunday, when we observe a national memorial of terror, demands we not avoid it. Can our faith in forgiveness shed any light on what happened that Tuesday morning 10 years ago in lower Manhattan?

Sunday is primarily a day of national mourning for the victims of an unforgettable terror in New York, Pennsylvania, and outside Washington, D.C., and for their families. It is also a time to honor the emergency personnel who saved many or were themselves sacrificed. Nor can one fail to feel gratitude for the military and security personnel who risked and lost their lives in assuring nothing like 9/11 ever happens again.

Still, in New York, at least, no prayers have been allowed lest religious rhetoric inflame tensions which have not yet subsided. At Sunday Mass, we have the freedom to pray and to listen to ancient Scriptures, awkward as they might sound on this date, for what they tell us about this tragedy and the mystery of forgiveness.

No Christian can doubt the evangelical priority of forgiveness. It is at the heart of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount - "blessed are the merciful," "do not resist evildoers," "love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you," and after that the words of the Our Father - "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The Gospel today pours salt on these already challenging words with a shocking hyperbole. "Forgive seventy times seven."

It would be easy to sidestep such texts. After all, the advice to forgive in the Book of Sirach and the counsel of "seventy times seven" in the Gospel of Matthew are nestled naturally in the structures of domestic and social life, not that of terror. But we should face the problem head on, make the right distinctions and search for some wisdom in the Bible which both complements and transcends the rhetoric today at Ground Zero.

The evangelical commandment to forgive, clear as it seems, demands interpretation

if it is not to do harm and look naïve. We can start with this. Forgiveness applies to people, not to events. Forgiving 9/11 makes no sense and no one is empowered to do that. Popes and priests do not forgive holocausts, war or terror. Forgiveness is something done face to face by the victims of evil, or their representatives. Forgiveness normally requires that the guilty acknowledge their guilt, show remorse and make restitution. If that is lacking, one may still forgive in the hope of restoring something lost and rebuilding what was destroyed, and for peace of mind (let go of it, we say), and finally as a profound sign of the kingdom of God. Mothers have lost children to terror and still chosen forgiveness over vengeance. A London housewife who lost her son in an act of terror began a foundation to support religious reconciliation. At the same time, the Bible and tradition admits something like an unforgivable sin.

In its religious meaning, forgiveness acts as a way of unbinding the sinner from the sin, of separating the criminal from the crime. But, the evil done by someone is still condemned. And, forgiveness is given to individuals. There is no absolution for crowds, mobs or armies. That's how and why Pope John Paul II forgave his assassin. That's how and why the Amish community forgave the school house massacre. Forgiveness essentially looks to reconciliation without either denying the evil or betraying the victims. We try to forgive in hope, in hyperbole and in the paradoxical language of "nevertheless, from now on." And, all this takes time.

Are there legal and political approximations to this evangelical mercy? I believe there are. Here are some.

Mercy incognito can be found in memorials that focus on memory, honor and love for the victims, not hatred and vengeance for others.

Mercy incognito can be discovered in restraint as the Book of Sirach advises us. It is already merciful to put the brakes on wrath and revenge.

Mercy incognito is there in human rights. Criminals, even terrorists, need to have their human rights protected. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations was crafted in the immediate aftermath of the holocaust. Terrible crimes and criminals should not have us sacrifice our convictions. Torture is always wrong.

Mercy incognito is present in the possibility of amnesty. This is perhaps the closest politics and the law can come to biblical forgiveness. It is the farthest step along the path to reconciliation. Even the law - concerned with justice - recognizes a time to end recrimination. The Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of South Africa are examples of that.

Yes, biblical forgiveness has political analogues to it. The political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, once called forgiveness the only hope for history which otherwise turns in endless cycles of revenge. Only something like forgiveness can stop that. Not loyalty to the dead, not vulgar calls for justice which are little more than revenge in disguise.

As the last century taught Catholics how to engage in ecumenical dialogue with Protestants and inter-religious dialogue with Jews, is it possible that 9/11 could teach us another incognito of mercy - how to dialogue with Muslims, the third Abrahamic religion? "Seventy times seven" ironically gives us a sense of the number of the failures that happen in life before we get it right.

Forgiveness in the shadow of 9/11? Possibly only in the incognito of honor, restraint, rights, limited punishment and the long dialogue of truth which makes all free. Not in easy absolution. Not in endless war.

If the voices of the dead on 9/11 could speak to us this Sunday from beyond the hell that consumed them 10 years ago in New York, Pennsylvania and outside Washington, what might they say? As Christians we may believe this. Do not forget. Do not kill. Be reconciled. For, we now live in another kingdom beyond revenge.

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