

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

November 12, 2019

I'm pretty sure you know that yesterday was "Veterans' Day." You probably also know that the holiday began as "Armistice Day," celebrating the end of World War I at 11:11 a.m. on 11/11/1918.

Armistice Day celebrates Peace; and Jesus told us that "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God*" (Matthew 5:9). Notice that Jesus commended peacemakers, not peace wishers or peace hoppers. And recall Desmond Tutu's reminder that "Peace is not made with friends. Peace is made with enemies."



And so I begin this rumination by asking, **with what or with whom do you need to make peace today?** Jesus gives us His Peace (John 14:27), and we are enjoined to "*make every effort to do what leads to peace*" (Romans 14:19). Beyond this, our Lord told us, "*for if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins*" (Matthew 6:14-15).

So I ask again, *with what or with whom do you need to make peace?*

At the same time, while most of us recognize the need to forgive, forgiveness is easily misunderstood and misapplied. I've shared this with you before, but I find it helpful to be reminded. Lewis Smedes, then a professor of theology at Fuller Seminary in California, wrote a book on forgiveness more than twenty years ago that has been very helpful to me.¹ Here are his main points

Forgiveness represents the very heart of the Good News of Jesus. Forgiveness offered and received is central to Christian faith. Still, I suspect that most of us know a lot more about standing in need of forgiveness than we know about the power to forgive. Forgiveness is difficult. It is not for the faint of heart.

When wrong is done to us, or to persons or to institutions that we love, our relationship with the perpetrators of this wrong is fractured, if not completely shattered. While we know that Jesus told us to love our enemies and to forgive our offenders times without number, this is much easier to say than it is to actually do. We say the words, "I forgive you," but many times I think we say the words long before they become real. Such premature speaking may in fact short-circuit much of the spiritual power that the Cross of Jesus released into the world, robbing our lives and our churches of much that God would give us.

Professor Smedes helped us greatly when he pointed out that forgiveness is really a four-step process. How long it takes to move through the process is determined by many variables, chief of which is the depth of the wound. Smedes' four stages are HURT, HATE,

¹ Lewis Smedes, *Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (HarperOne, 1996).

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HEALING, and COMING TOGETHER (reconciliation). Each stage needs to be filled with the desire that God's Spirit will enable us to see and feel as God sees and feels.

Now persons who have been offended are frequently advised—especially in religious circles—to move directly from stage one to stage four, from “Hurt” to “Coming Together.” Far from producing forgiveness, such short-circuiting (which is really denial, distortion, and dishonesty) leads instead to avoidance, to distancing from others, and to creeping spiritual impotence.

All four stages must be honored.

1. **HURT** doesn't need much explanation. Hurt is the visceral experience of being wounded, intentionally or unintentionally. Sometimes the wound is physical, sometimes psychological or spiritual. Physical responses may include anger, hyperventilation, avoidance, flight, fight, etc.
2. **HATE** quickly follows hurt. Hate involves our nearly instinctual desire to hurt in return, the desire to inflict pain even beyond that which we have suffered. While we cannot nurse our hate, we must acknowledge it and allow it to speak, if real forgiveness is ever to follow. While healing only comes through the release of forgiveness, we short-circuit the healing process if we avoid acknowledging the depth of the wound. Forgiveness will not be complete if it fails to penetrate the depth of the wound. Hatred and anger take us to that darkest place.

When we are in this stage we often ruminate about the offense. We have a hard time thinking about anything else. We avoid the other person, and we're afraid of what we might do if we see them. We may fantasize about what we'd like to do to them. When the offense comes into our minds, we feel anger. Our heart rates increase. We may clench our fists, actually or metaphorically. If healing is to come, we do not nurture hate, but we do acknowledge it.

Healing must be powerful enough to deal with all of this intensity. Superficial statements of "it doesn't matter" or quick statements of forgiveness do not get to the bottom of the wound. This stage can last quite a long time.

3. **HEALING** is the longest stage. After we have experienced the darkness for a time, and it is sometimes a long, long time, we begin to be aware of another Presence beside us in our pain. If we open our suffering as best we can to this Spirit of God, we are gradually enabled to view our afflictors through “softer eyes,” and the third stage, an “Inner Healing” begins.

Forgiveness is not “acting as though it didn't happen,” because while trust is easily destroyed, it is not easily rebuilt. If our relationship ever returns to a place of great trust, that restoration is significantly dependent on the offender's willingness to behave in trustworthy ways. Still, this requires that we grant the offender some opportunity to be trustworthy.

We don't let our guard down entirely, but we do let it down enough to permit small demonstrations of trustworthiness. When we're with the offender, we don't give him or her “the silent treatment,” but are as courteous and kind as we can manage. While we don't protect the offender from the natural and appropriate consequences of the offense, neither do we try to augment or supplement her or his pain.

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In this third stage, we are past the intensity of our pain and have entered a time of relative emptiness. We may quietly discover that our anger has subsided, and we may feel little or nothing when the wound comes into our minds. We may feel sadness. We may no longer avoid the offender, but we have little interest in being with him or her. As God's Spirit continues to work in us—sometimes over a period of years—we begin to see our offender through God's eyes.

We begin to sense his or her own pain and brokenness, out of which our own wound was given. We begin to be able to pray just the tiniest bit for this person's healing. We begin to think of him or her with growing compassion rather than with anger or hatred. We no longer experience physiological changes when the offense comes to mind. As God continues to grant us the mind of Christ, we eventually find ourselves able to say with our Lord, "Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing."

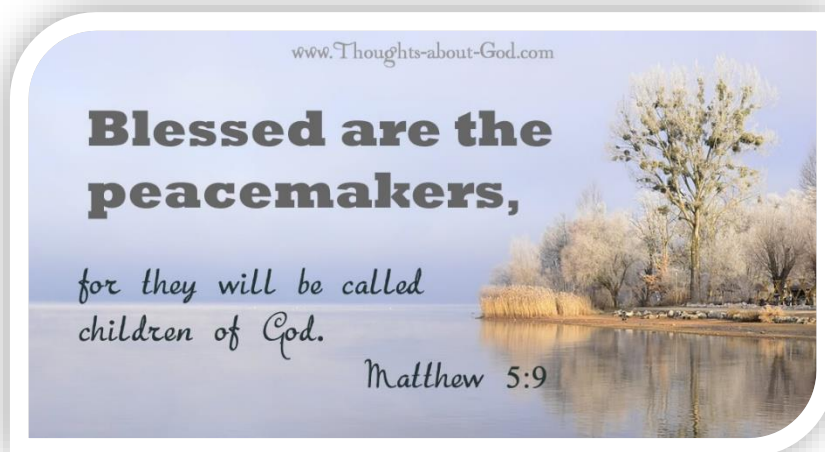
At long last, we find that we can "put our end of the rope down," no longer feeling any need to tug or pull against the offender. We can walk away from the wound into the future, continuing to pray for God's healing and blessing in the offender's life. While we may think of the wound when seeing this other person, we do not ever bring it up again except as an expression of thanks for God's healing.

As healing becomes complete, we become able to invite the offender to restore the relationship at some level—the "Coming Together." This final stage of forgiveness, leading to reconciliation, depends as much on the offender as on the offended. Forgiveness, like grace, must be received.

4. **COMING TOGETHER** may or may not happen. Coming together has to do with reconciliation, with spoken forgiveness, which we can offer with or without repentance on the other person's part, even as Jesus did from the Cross. Sometimes the other person is dead by the time we ourselves get to this point. Sometimes they have become unavailable in other ways, such as dementia or distance. Our own final release sometimes comes through writing a letter offering forgiveness that we may or may not ever mail. Many people find it very powerful to burn such a letter as an act of sacrifice to God.

God's Peace to you
this day.

Dave



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