

Saturday "Sermon"

David C. Stancil, Ph.D.
First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia
dave@fbcbristol.org
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Hiroshima and Beyond

August 6 was the sixty-sixth anniversary of our dropping an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. In just a few weeks we'll observe the tenth anniversary of 9-11, and along the way our nation continues to reap the painful results of the unbridled greed that led us into The Great Recession.

As I've reflected on these things, it has occurred to me that while there are many dimensions to these events, one dimension common to all of them may be the need for forgiveness. Both as a nation and as individuals, we are unable to move into the future with hope and health so long as we carry with us the burden of wrongs done to us in the past. This is a spiritual matter of the first order, and it is a separate question from the matters of culpability and justice.

The most helpful approach to forgiveness I've ever heard came from Professor Lewis Smedes of Fuller Seminary in California. He pointed out that there are two important intermediate stages between hurt and forgiveness, which he called "hate" and "healing." If these two stages are missed or short-circuited, real forgiveness and healing seldom occur, and these in-between stages cannot occur without the redemptive work of the Spirit of God.

The stage of "hate" is not about "nursing our wound," but rather has to do with acknowledging the depth of our pain. Superficial statements of "it doesn't matter" or quick statements of forgiveness do not get to the bottom of the wound. Just as a physician must clean a physical wound completely, all the way to the bottom, in order to prevent infection, so we need to let ourselves become aware of the full extent of our hurt if God's healing is to penetrate to the core of our pain. Forgiveness will not be complete if it fails to penetrate the depth of the wound. If healing is to come, we do not nurture our woundedness, but we must fully experience it.

The third stage of "healing" is the longest part of forgiveness, and it sometimes takes years for this healing to occur. In this stage the passage of time causes our own pain to become less, and we begin to sense some of the pain of our offender, the pain out of which the offense originally grew. We begin to see our offender through God's eyes, not excusing the offense, but understanding its source more deeply.

As God's Spirit continues to work, God's grace enables us to finally become able to offer forgiveness to the other person with or without repentance and apology on their part, as Jesus did for us from the Cross. While our relationship with the offender may or may not be restored, we become able "to put our end of the rope down," and to move into the future with wholeness and with hope. May it be so for us on 9-11.