

THE FINAL FORM OF LOVE

(A Sermon on Forgiveness)

September 30, 2007- Preached by Rev. Dr. James W. White
First Congregational United Church of Christ, Colorado Springs

Greetings

Let me begin with grateful thanks to Benjamin and the Worship Council for this opportunity to preach here at a most familiar sanctuary. For almost two years, as most of you know, I have been in ministerial protocol "banishment." During this time I polished off my *Christianity 101* book, Patti and I did a 500 mile pilgrimage-walk on *The Camino de Santiago* in Spain, the house got painted, a number of churches were visited, and a lot of fish were caught. We appreciated the beautiful "Welcome Back" last Spring and the first Jim White memorial lectureship by Bishop Spong. For the last four months we've been in Wichita in heat and humidity while I was doing an interim ministry at University Congregational Church.

I tell you, it's nice to be back in Colorado and here. Thank you!

Scripture

We have three Bible readings today. The first is from the book of the prophet Hosea. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says this passage "reveals the heart of God. In it Hosea, speaking for Yahweh, declares God's love and care for Israel, his right anger at their faithlessness and intention for deserved punishment and, then, in immediate turn-around, reveals God's forgiveness, God's heart of compassion.

Hosea 11:1-9 ["When Israel...sword shall rage...I will not execute my fierce anger."] *Don't let anybody ever tell you that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath! The second lesson is from Luke's Gospel concerning Jesus' crucifixion between two thieves. The passage has Jesus' first "word" or utterance of his seven last words from the cross, this one spoken to God on behalf of his oppressors.*

Luke 23:32-34 ["Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."] *Our third reading is in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, here involving the early follower of Jesus, known as Stephen, "a man full of grace and power." Stephen preaches a sermon ends which ends with these words and resulting responses:*

Acts 7:51-60 [The stoning of Stephen and his forgiving prayer] *So Stephen became "The first Christian martyr," dying in keeping with the heart of Yahweh and of Jesus. May God bless to our appropriation these three testimonies.*

The Song

The song that Lyn Boudreau -her birthday being today--and I are about to sing you are about is called "That Kind of Grace," recorded by Anne Hills and David Roth in the album Rising in Love. The first verse alludes to the 1960s bombing of the church in Birmingham where four young black girls were killed. The second verse refers to Michael Donald was lynched in 1981 by Klansmen in Mobile, Alabama. And the third remembers Rodney King, beat up by the police in the '92 Los Angeles Riots. He asked the poignant question, "Why can't we just get along?" Join us in singing the last familiar refrain.

[PLEASE NEXT PAGE 6 FOR WORDS TO THIS SONG]

THAT KIND OF GRACE

by

Anne Hills and David Roth

Sunday morning, Birmingham, Quiet in the church,
Bombs were planted, house of God, Children's lives were lost,
And your daughter, she was one, Angel without wings.
How could anyone forgive Those who do such things?

**Refrain: And when I sing "Amazing Grace, Your face is what I see.
I hope some day that kind of grace Will find its way to me.**

Friday evening in Mobile, Klansmen killing time
Saw young Michael walking by; He would do just fine.
Quiet student, mother's best, Pleading for his life,
Strung him up to make the point, Sharper than a knife.
*Beulah Mae, his mother stood, People all around
In the courtroom listening, As the truth was found.*
From her mouth no curses fell, No profanity:
"I will do to others what I'd have them do to me."

**Refrain: And when I sing "Amazing Grace, Your face is what I see.
I hope some day that kind of grace Will find its way to me.**

[Bridge]

Thursday afternoon in the park, turn the radio on:
The verdict in Los Angeles, Oh, what have we done?
Images of violence: Yellow, Black, and White,
Fifty-two dead, millions lost. Who can win this fight?
*And on the screen a face appears, trembling through and through,
One we've seen so many times, Beaten on the news.*
I can barely hear the words, Full of fear and doubt:
"People we can't live like this...We've got to work this out."

**Refrain: And when I sing "Amazing Grace, Your face is what I see.
I hope some day that kind of grace will find its way to me.**

[leading to...a capella singing:]

AMAZING GRACE, HOW SWEET THE SOUNG,
THAT SAVED A WRETCH LIKE ME.
I ONCE WAS LOST, BUT NOW AM FOUND
WAS BLIND BUT NOW I SEE

Sermon

Returning to preach is just a little scary. On my retirement Sunday here as I was greeting people at the door, one of our elder members came up and said, "O, Dr. White, this is so hard." I asked her why, and she said, "Well, I've been a member for almost fifty years and seen four ministers come and go--and each one was worse than the last." I'm glad you've chosen a clergy leader so able--and what a powerful sermon he preached last Sunday!--and, I rejoice with you that the church has been in a thrive mood. Shortly after we came back to FCC and I honored to join Jerry Jordan as a minister emeritus, one parishioner came up and asked if I might do his funeral. I said, "I think I have next Thursday afternoon available" ...but that was not what he meant. I done a little guest pulpit supply the last two years and tell you a story I heard. A minister preached a candidating sermon and, afterward, a man came up to him at the door and said, "Your sermon was boring." That set him back, and the critic wandered off. Soon he came back through the line and said, "You weren't prepared." The clergy was reeling. Then the man came through a third time: "Too long!" The minister pulled the moderator of the church aside and asked her, "Who is that guy, anyway?" She said, "Oh, don't pay any attention to him. He just goes around repeating what everybody else says."

So, here we go.

Dear friends here at First Congregational, perhaps you, like me, are more than a little worried about our world. Recently I encountered some words that spoke to me in my concern. The words were/are in a book called *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live*. The book is written by Don and Emily Saliers, a musical father and daughter. Don teaches church music at The Chandler School of Theology/Emory University and Emily Saliers is one the Indigo Girls. It's a book about connecting Saturday night and Sunday morning music. Don is an old friend. He and I entered divinity school as classmates together in 1959. So, he's exactly my age. The book has these moving words:

Now in his sixties [he's seventy now], Don knows that the song interprets him and where he is in life very differently. It's like the experience you might have with a song heard and sung in childhood, such as "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." You hear it so differently later in life when you realize how small your light is and how dark the world can be.

So, I'm feeling how dark the world is in its bitternesses, estrangements, desires to get even, go to war, strike back, do "an eye for a fingernail."

I wonder: Is there anything that can save us? Anything?

I do have an answer. It is "the little light" that I have, and, if I had only one sermon to give, I would want it to be this one. It is what I have learned after forty-five years of ministry and am concluding is "saving truth." It is the heart and soul message of Jesus. It is what makes Jesus "the Savior of the world." It is Jesus' final word uttered on the cross to the thieves hanging at his right hand and his left hand, to the soldiers below who crucified him, the religious and political leaders who condemned him, and his own followers who betrayed and forsook him. He said,

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

Jesus' final utterance is an echo of similar words which he spoke in his Sermon on the Plain of Luke 6, namely,

Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful...

*Judge not, and you will not be judged;
Condemn not, and you will not be condemned;
Forgive and you will be forgiven.*

These words are the foundation stones of the Good News. One Bible scholar says that two-thirds of the things Jesus said and did are directly or indirectly related to forgiveness. Forgiveness is Gospel. Lyn Boudreau told me yesterday that once she asked Sister Ann Stedman of Benet Hill about how community is maintained and she replied in one word: "Forgiveness."

But forgiveness is hard, HARD! It is conspicuous by its absence. How many bitter, bitter people do you know? People who cannot forgive the offenses of their inadequate mother, their ungrateful child, their cheating ex? People go to their graves still cursing a friend who betrayed them decades and decades ago. Our courts are filled with cases of people trying to get revenge. We fill up our jails and prisons in anger and frustration trying to punish those who did wrong. The Hatfields and McCoys story is repeated all over the world: in Ireland, in Darfur, in Myanmar. Last year Kathy Kelly, the Nobel Prize nominated peace activist, spoke at Colorado College. She said that in the last fifteen years she had made twenty-some medical mission trips to Iraq. She was planning on a trip last spring, but her friends there said, "Don't return now. It is way too dangerous. This is not a war between Shiites and Sunnis," they said, "but between and among families and neighborhoods and individuals; it is a Hobbesian 'war of all against all.'" What we have released in Iraq are deep suspicions and hatreds and unreconciled conflicts of people, exacerbated by one new violent death ever twelve minutes.

You know, we Christians have three primary values: hope, faith and love, and, St. Paul says, "The greatest of these is love." What the American theologian of the 1900s, Reinhold Niebuhr, said about love is that "*We must be saved by the final form of love which is FORGIVENESS.*" I repeat, "(We) must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness." Niebuhr got it. He got it right.

The contemporary writer who re-alerted me to the centrality of forgiveness is René Girard, a cultural historian and Roman Catholic layman who teaches at Stanford. From his study of literature and societies, Girard has concluded that greed, violence and victimization are the ways that most societies conduct themselves, governments ever willing to say it is okay to die for—that is, kill for--your country. They try to make violence sacred. Political elites will use religion to justify their victimizing.

Making violence sacred, Girard says, is *not* what Jesus did. What Jesus' death on the cross means is to signal the end of violence. On behalf of God, Jesus said "NO MORE VICTIMS, NO MORE VIOLENCE, and NO MORE BLAMING." And the evidence for this work is the fact that on the cross, where Jesus, the Lord of Heaven with every right to accuse and condemn, did not call down fire from heaven but said, "*Father, forgive them; they do not know what they do.*"

Now, here is the point you don't want to miss. What Jesus did in living out a life of love with its final form of forgiveness is that **he let loose a virus that will save the world...and it is the only thing that can or will save us.** That is how he is "The Savior of the World."

Happily, some people got it. First of all, there was Stephen, the first martyr, whose story is told in the 6th and 7th chapter of Acts. He is accused of stirring up

trouble, talking about Jesus' way. False witnesses are brought in to testify against him. He comes before the governing council, his face glowing like an angel, and delivers a powerful sermon—the longest in the New Testament. The preaching so enflamed his enemies that they cast him out of the city and began to stone him. He prayed, “*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,*” and then added as his last words, “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*”

He got it. He got the Jesus virus of forgiveness.

From my study of Christian history I do believe the early Christians, those of the first few centuries, got it too. The stories of the saints are replete with forgiveness spoken for their torturers and murderers. The monks and nuns of the Middle Ages by hospitality and sanctuary kept the saving virus alive in the barbarian cultures which were so heavy on retributive justice. It sprang to life most fully in the 13th century when Francis of Assisi went to Egypt during the Crusades to try and affect reconciliation between the King Louis and Saladin. During the Reformation, Luther did not get it. Calvin did not get it. Henry VIII certainly didn't. But some Anabaptists did, like Menno Simons after whom the Mennonites were named and who legacy resurfaced in the movie *The Witness* about an Amish community in Pennsylvania. A cobbler by the name of George Fox got it; his successors, the Quakers are at work today as Witnesses to Peace, standing between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Here and there, through the years, the radical love ethic which would have “no more victims” and plenteous forgiveness has maintained itself. Bishop Desmond Tutu has a book whose title is right: *No Future without Forgiveness*. He knows that is true for South Africa. Miroslav Volf, a Christian Croatian now teaching at Yale Divinity School, says that forgiveness is the only way to reconciliation in the Balkans. In our own life time, we saw redemptive forgiveness arise in The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose goal in the civil rights struggle was not just to free the oppressed but to redeem the oppressors as well--all non-violently.

Jesus' saving virus is contracted one by one by one. Christ isn't going to force the way of love with forgiveness on you. It has to be adopted in heart and adapted in your life. And it's not easy. In the 1940s play *A Raisin in the Sun*, the father of the family, Big Walter, dies, and his heirs receive a \$10,000 life insurance payment. Three thousand of the ten goes to make a down payment on a house. [This is an old play!] Five thousand was to go to the daughter Bereatha so she can go to medical school and two to Walter, Jr. But Junior takes all the remaining money and blows it in a cockamamie get-rich-quick scheme. The sister is devastated. Her future is destroyed. She speaks her rage to her mother, and mama says, “Bereatha, you need to forgive your brother, to love him.”

She cries back, “But there's nothing there to love!” Mama replies, *There's always something to love, child. When do you think is the time to love somebody most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then you ain't through learning—because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hissef 'cause the world done whipped him. When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.*

Characteristically, opponents of the forgiveness line of Christian thought have always asked, “Well, what about Adolf Hitler or Tojo (whom we are reminded of this week on Ken Burn’s *The War* series?) How do you forgive them?” For contemporary Americans, the current question is, “How do you forgive Osama bin Laden?” And for me, quite frankly, it is “How can I forgive George W. Bush?”

Well, I got some help on my forgiveness problem. I re-read the 15th century spiritual book *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. After the Bible it is the second most read Christian book. In one of the devotions, à Kempis says we ought to always attribute to others more virtuous motives and goodness than we do ourselves. So I tried to think that way about our President. I have to say, then, that he did not order the invasion of Iraq for oil or to revitalize the military-industrial complex or play power politics—all plausible theories put forward by thoughtful analysts. But, if I’m going to give Mr. Bush good motives, I must say something different. I say he did it because he really believed that “freedom and democracy” with all the attendant American values OF “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” would be welcomed in that troubled part of the world. Of course and sadly, he was wrong. He and others similarly high-minded folk forgot that you can’t force an idea—even a wonderful one—on your spouse, much less another country by the gun.

(I hope I’ve said this with due respect, with understanding and forgiveness.)

In the Older and Newer Testaments, the heart of God is of love with the final form of forgiveness. We hear it in Hosea when God asks, “*How can I give you up, O Israel? My heart recoils within me. I will not execute my fierce anger.*” We read it in Acts with Stephen’s words, “*Do not hold this sin against them.*” In J.R.R. Tolkein’s three volume book *The Lord of the Rings*, the Christian value of having **pity**, being merciful and forgiving, is central also, just as in the Bible.

Frodo says to Gandalf, “What a pity that Bilbo did not stab the vile creature Gollum when he had the chance.”

“Pity? [Gandalf replies] *It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and mercy: not to strike without need.*”

“*I am sorry,*” says Frodo. “*But... I do not feel any pity for Gollum.*”

“*You have not seen him,*” Gandalf broke in.

“*No, and I don’t want to,*” said Frodo. “*...He deserves death.*”

“*Deserves it!* [Gandalf shouts] *I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be eager to deal out death in judgment...My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least.*”

This phrase, “***The pity of Bilbo*** [the mercy of Bilbo, the Forgiveness of Bilbo] ***may rule the fate of many,***” is the only declaration to be repeated in all three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is the leitmotiv of Tolkein’s epic, its animating theme, its Christian epicenter and circumference. Gandalf and Bilbo and J.R.R. Tolkein got the saving virus.

Others here may be coming down with it too. Turn to your neighbor, would you? Touch your neighbor. And say, “You are forgiven.” Touch him, touch her, and say, “You are forgiven.”

And let the people say, “Amen!”