

Allow People to Change
 Seventy times Seven: How many Times to Forgive
 Matthew 18: 21-35
 St. Clare's, Ann Arbor
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Come Holy Spirit and enkindle within us the fire of your burning love. In your most blessed name we pray, Amen.

Good Morning!

I have, we have an amazing Diocesan Staff. That's my belief. I hope you share it. If not let me know. Anyway—this past week we were having our weekly staff meeting. We always begin, after some prayer, with what we call our “Wins.” In a hard world where we are all super good at critiquing, I specifically want my colleagues to begin our time together by reflecting on what in the last week or so has gone right. What did we get done and get done properly? Our short hand for this –is our “Wins”.

Last week our property manager Tony Perez, said that he was counting one of his wins, as when he said publicly, “I think you should let that one go, Bishop.” Background. I have been grouching for some time about a real estate agent we use. I grouse because two years ago, this particular agent, posted a sign for a parking lot we had for rent. The phone number listed on the sign, in very big print, the phone number people should call if they were interested in renting this parking lot, was wrong. It was the wrong number, and it took two months for someone to notice and bring it to the attention of the real estate agent. This real estate agent prior to this, and after has done some good, very good work for us. But every time you bring up his name, I go off. About how the phone number was wrong and he didn't notice and we lost potential renters...every time I do this.

And Tony was counting as a win, when he graciously looked up at me, as I had just completed said rant about this person, Tony counted it as a win, when he said to me, “I think you should just let that one go, Bishop.” To which I burst out laughing. Because I heard him, and more importantly, I heard myself. So, I laughed. And remembered what my spouse Susan has said about me, “Bonnie will most certainly forgive you, but she has a much harder time forgetting...” True. And not my best quality.

Peter, asked Jesus, “If another member of the church sins against me, ‘How often should I forgive, as many as seven times?’”

Jesus replied, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

In a world that is in crisis. In a country, as I have said before, in a country that is a fecal festival of antagonism and polarization, in our neighborhoods, and communities of faith that can be distressed and riddled with anxiety, the theological idea an embodied practice of forgiveness has to be forefront of our hearts, minds and souls.

German Theologian, and Princeton Seminary Professor Hanna Reichel, has spent a great deal of their time comparing the rise of fascism and the Nazi party in Germany to our country's current predicament. In their slight yet stunning book, *For Such a Time as This: An Emergency Devotional*, Reichel makes the point that we must allow people to change, and by extension forgive them for the actions they have taken, the things they have done in the past, (pp 121-24).

Reichel begins a chapter, by quoting orthodox theologian Karl Barth. Barth is doing a play on Jesus' call for all who labor and weary to come to him. Barth writes using Jesus' words as an inspiration:

Come to me, all you unpleasant ones, you evil Hitler boys and Hitler girls, you brutal SS soldiers, you horrendous Gestapo villains, you sad compromisers and collaborators, all you who followed the crowd who for so long...Come to me, you who are guilty and complicit... I know you well, I do not ask you who you are and what you have done, I see only that you are at the end... you must start over, I will give you rest and refresh you, for precisely with you I will now begin from scratch! (p 122).

Then Reichel says:

Forgiveness is a treacherous thing. If forgiveness is demanded or claimed outright, it puts a blanket over harm done. If it is withheld altogether, it forces perpetrator and victim to remain defined by their past. (repeat again) In both cases, it is the opposite of grace: It enables sin rather than overcoming it, (p122).

Reichel then offers, and this is the part I need to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest, "Allow people to change," (p 123).

What would it be like, (I say to myself) and to all of us who have ears to hear, if we were to: "Allow people to change."

If we do not let people change, we will remain frozen, brittle, sharp, only able to crack and break. But if we allow people to change, if we move on, if our animosity melts, our ability to bend in the wind, sway with changes, will enable us to engage in imaging and even creating a new path forward, no longer driving while only looking in the rearview mirror. The only thing ensured, by that is an immanent crash.

Reichel says, "*Shaming and blaming makes people defensive. This is well-known. It isolates and antagonizes them. It prompts them to double-down and dig in their heels. [People] They direct anger and resentment outward instead of asking themselves hard questions, (p 123).*

I am not, nor do I believe that Reichel is advocating a cheap grace, when we sin we must own our failings, name our errors, recognition and contrition, precedes absolution. And true recompense includes an amendment of ways. YES. AND...

Reichel, Bart and thank God, Jesus they all invite us to create a space where there may be room and safety for us and our neighbors, to see ourselves, hear what we have said, absorb the impact of our actions regardless of our intentions and to then change our ways and do better.

That process only happens, if we who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, remember that we are called seventy x seven, to forgive.

And speaking as a sinner, to folks who may also be, Thanks be to God.

Amen.