

“The Will to Embrace”

Luke 23:33-43;
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I just received a set of articles relating to the death of my cousin's husband on the 90th floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11th. Gary Bird was his name, and he was there because he had just been hired to be Senior Vice President of Marsh and McLennon, which lost 600 of its 1,700 employees who worked at the World Trade Center. He was there for his first meeting with the company in preparation for his tenure as Senior Vice President. He had asked his wife, my cousin Donna, with a wink in his eye whether or not he should wear cowboys boots to New York City. Donna, smiling, said she didn't think it advisable, even though he offered to remove the spurs.

Gary was a cowboy born and raised. His family were ranchers in Arizona, and even though he rose to prominence as one of the nation's experts in Risk Management, he remained a cowboy not only in his heart, but in his work. He had taken a whole summer off, having left his last job in late spring. He spent his time with his two teenaged children: Amanda, 15 and Andrew, 13. They worked together on his ranch breeding horses.

Gary was to begin his career overseeing Risk Management for Marsh and McLennon from his home in Phoenix. He had an 8:15 morning meeting in New York. He was fifty-one years old.

His son Andrew asked that his memorial service be held on October 4th, the feast day of St. Francis, as a way of striking a note of peace in a war-torn world. My cousin Donna is a deeply religious person. She's a lawyer in private practice and volunteers her legal skills and wisdom for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Phoenix. When asked about what she thinks ought to be done about those who perpetrated this awful deed that has forever changed her life and the lives of her two children, she said simply, "I would like to see whoever is responsible for this smothered in some kind of positive force. Whether it be Americans standing up to whoever did this or the force of prayer."

Smothering our enemies with positive force would not be what comes to my mind, but it came to hers, because she lives in the real world with a faith that believes that a positive force ought to be given a chance as the first option; the first resort.

Strange logic.

I have often said, if only to myself, that you have no power to forgive someone who does not themselves seek forgiveness. And I still believe that that's true. But I also think that there is wisdom in forgiving the unforgivable, if only for one's own spiritual health. Sins remembered and given harbor in the human heart have ways of rotting the soul from the

inside out. The only cure for that rotting process is to forgive, even before forgiveness is asked. So, the words from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

No one had asked Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, for forgiveness. In fact, as far as we can tell at this point in the story, they continued to cast lots to divide up his clothing. The people stood by watching and the leaders scoffed. The soldiers continued to mock him. The sign over his head (“Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”) is meant to be a joke. But still, Jesus preempts the request for forgiveness by forgiving. Strange logic. “The logic of the cross,” Paul called it, “which is foolishness to the wise, but to those who are being saved, it is the power and wisdom of God.” (I Cor. 1:18)

The remembering of past sins and the unwillingness to forgive them is just as responsible for the state of wars and rumors of wars as is the inability to confess sins in the first place. The harboring of hatred and the permanent remembering of past sins, for whatever good reason, is like a time bomb set for some unknown hour.

Miroslav Volf is a theologian currently teaching at Yale University. He is Croatian by birth and began his teaching career in his native country, the former Yugoslavia, while the wars raged around him. He is a theologian who believes deeply in the cross of the crucified Christ and believes that forgiveness from such a cross must in some way inform the way we live our lives.

At the beginning of his book about embracing the enemy [Exclusion and Embrace: Abingdon, 1996] he recounts a story about giving one of his lectures that would become his book:

“After I finished my lecture, Jurgen Moltmann [a world-renowned professor of theology] stood up and asked one of his typical questions, both concrete and penetrating: ‘But can you embrace a cetnik?’ It was the winter of 1993. For months now the notorious Serbian fighters called ‘cetnik’ had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches, and destroying cities. I had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Can I embrace a cetnik—the ultimate other, so to speak, the evil other? What would justify such an embrace? Where would I draw the strength for it? What would it do to my identity as a human being and as a Croat? It took me a while to answer, though I immediately knew what I wanted to say. ‘No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.’ ” [p. 9.]

Later in his book, Miroslav Volf writes that the will to embrace must precede all issues of truth and justice, just as Jesus’ own will to embrace his enemies preceded even their ability to seek forgiveness. God’s will to embrace—you know the old sermon illustration “God loves you THIS much [arms outstretched as if on the cross]”—precedes our own willingness to admit guilt. The will to embrace must precede all questions of truth and justice. But the **actual** embrace, the embrace itself, cannot take place until truth is spoken and justice done. [p. 29]

This seems like such a contradiction. Either you love your enemy as God loves you or you don't. But my cousin Donna, whom I'm quite sure has never read Miroslav Volf, understands in the instinct of her own faith that the willingness to surround her enemies—the ones responsible for the death of her beloved husband and father of their two teenaged children—with a positive force, is born of this *a priori* principle of the will to embrace. All questions of truth and justice are secondary to this first principle of God's greatest love expressed in the cross. These questions will of course need to be addressed, but the will to embrace must precede them all.

This is, of course, all scandalous. And all of us will have to admit with Miroslav Volf that we are all failures in the way of Christ. But still, we must enter that scandal and there to discover the true kingship of Christ not only over our hearts, but over all the world. And there discover a companion in the will to embrace who makes, finally, the embrace possible.

G. K. Chesterton once said that all of Christianity rests on a kind of sacred jest. A crucified King. There is the irony. There is the incongruity of our story. A sacred jest. And Chesterton goes on to say in his delightful way that for the last 2000 years we've been laughing at that sacred jest. Christ, crucified, condemned, abandoned and betrayed by those he loved and even by God. Over the cross hangs the joke: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Christ the King is willing to embrace even before any request for forgiveness, any repentance, even while the mocking is going on, before all questions of truth and justice are resolved.

This is the divine jest that we celebrate this last Sunday of the Church year. And it is expressed most eloquently in my cousin's hope that the enemies responsible for the death of her husband be surrounded in some sort of positive energy, either by being brought to justice and recognizing the enormity of the evil they have perpetrated on so many innocent ones, or by the power of prayer.

It is a profound statement of hope in hopeless times.

It is a participation in the willingness to embrace the enemy with all the positive power that faith can bring to the complex horror of our times.

And it is our only hope for the future of this good earth, which God in love brought into being. The only way out of this dilemma is to participate in this divine jest. The crucified one who forgives from the cross is my King.

Let the world say, "Amen."

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