

THE LINE BETWEEN JUSTICE & FORGIVENESS

Luke 23: 26-46

People do some awful things to other people. And even though the line between perpetrator and victim can run through all of us in some way, there are some really awful things that some people do to other people. Think about Bruce MacArthur and his gruesome murder of a number of persons from the gay village over a number of years. Think about Toronto Neurosurgeon Mohammed Shamji's gruesome murder of his wife. Think about mass shooters who attack innocent people in houses of worship or children and youth in schools. Think about atrocities committed against minority groups or peoples who worship differently or speak differently or are part of another race or tribe? Think about children or women abused physically or sexually, or murdered by men, one every six days according to a recent statistic in Canada. Our news is full of it on a daily basis.

Among the many things that are said and the many words spoken, one in particular comes up repeatedly: justice. People want justice! But what is justice? Justice can mean many things, but often, justice is about punishment, and sufficient punishment to fit the severity of the crime. Since we no longer have capital punishment in Canada, the measure for punishment is typically the length of imprisonment. Someone who does awful things needs to do serious time, and in some cases, we cannot imagine there ever being enough time served to make up for what's been done.

But what about forgiveness? Is there a place for forgiveness? Well, let's begin by pondering what forgiveness is. Forgiveness is recognizing that for all the justice we can ever get, nothing can ever change or reverse what has happened and what has been lost. Forgiveness, then, has to involve some measure of letting it go, letting it go even though it's the most awful and terrible thing that's happened, letting it go because not letting it go will lead to worse things in the end.

Forgiveness, then, is also recognizing that justice can't just be about punishment. Punishment alone doesn't include any possibility of redemption. Punishment alone may satisfy the victim initially. But punishment cannot change what's happened, and the trauma and bitterness of victimization can become an ongoing torment unless some kind of redemptive journey is undertaken. To be on a redemptive journey, forgiveness is an essential element. Forgiveness can release the victim from their ongoing victimization by freeing them from the negative feelings of hate, revenge and helplessness that can torment them in an ongoing way. To forgive is to take the power back by finding a way to serve love in the world in the face of what has been violated and destroyed.

Beyond how it serves the victim, though, forgiveness can also bring release for the perpetrator, opening a door to atonement for the crime that can bring positive change in their lives. Atonement means some way is provided for the perpetrator to make up for what they've done, even if they can never change what's happened. Atonement also opens the door to the perpetrator experiencing serious remorse and regret and a commitment to change into the future. Now many people don't care what happens to the perpetrator. The harsher the punishment the better, they say. But if there is any room to care what happens to the perpetrator because for their all their twisted evil they are human, and if there's any faith that redemption needs to be explored as a possibility, then some measure of forgiveness as letting go has to happen.

Ok. Not easy, especially as we ponder specific cases. How can we find ways to give sufficient weight to the injustice, name it and address it for all its evil, and yet still find a way to justice that includes a commitment to forgiveness as an essential requirement of the journey? That's hard, really hard. I've had bad things done to me but nothing like the awful things we see and hear in our news every day. But there are some amazing stories, real stories of people who have been violated severely and yet have found incredible ways to choose a way forward that includes forgiveness without compromising justice.

Let me offer an example. On September 16, 1999, Irina Krasovskaya's husband, businessman Anatoly Krasovsky, was abducted and murdered by security forces in Belarus. No one has ever claimed responsibility and Anatoly's body has never been found. Here's how Irina tells her story: I knew something was wrong because Anatoly's cell phone was disabled for a long time and that has never happened before. He was in Minsk with a politician friend, and I hoped they were just in the subway or at the Sauna as they had planned.

But after midnight when I still had heard nothing, I panicked and began calling around local police stations, hospitals and morgues. No one knew anything. By morning I was destroyed. I knew this had to be political because Anatoly had disappeared with a prominent opposition politician.

And so began the long years of not knowing. It was a very stressful situation and I had no choice but to just get on with my life and take care of my family. Many people tried to give me advice, but I felt alone. I couldn't talk to my mother because she was old and had bad health; I couldn't talk to my two daughters because I didn't want to worry them; and I couldn't talk to my friends because how could I tell the same story over and over again. I saw everything around me as grey. I'd look down and see only grey asphalt at my feet. I couldn't stand straight to look at the world around me. It was a complete physical reaction.

But then, about three years after the abduction, one autumn afternoon in Minsk, I was suddenly able to look up and see colour again, the colours of the red and yellow leaves. “My god they are so beautiful,” I said to myself. That’s when I could breathe again. But I was not the same. The pain is still inside me, sometimes bigger, sometimes lighter, but it is always with me.

We tried to find out the truth about all the ‘disappeared’ by raising public awareness. I met with many international political leaders to bring attention to these cases and to give families a voice. We tried all legal methods inside and outside the country. We wrote hundreds of letters to Belarus authorities, asked thousands of questions, but all to no avail.

Again and again we were told that the secrecy of the investigation meant they couldn’t tell us anything. My own personal belief is that my husband and the politician were kidnapped together, then bundled into two separate cars and killed in Minsk that same night. But I don’t know what happened to them next. No bodies have ever been found.

There is no strong proof that President Lukashenko was involved in the crime, but I also know that in Belarus nothing happens without his approval. My anger is personally aimed at him because he destroyed not only my life, but also the life of my country by taking it back to old soviet-style dictatorship. The main feature of this society now is fear, and the disappearances have created a new wave of fear.

I’m not angry with the person who pulled the trigger because they were just following orders. The real perpetrators are those who still hold top positions within government. I can see their faces and I know they are married with kids. If I think about them too much I start to dream of revenge so then I have to stop myself because I know revenge will destroy me. I cannot allow myself to bleed and die inside.

It’s easier to forgive when you don’t know who has hurt you because it remains abstract. But in my case, I know exactly who the perpetrators are. If you know who did it, but there is no acknowledgement and no accountability, then forgiveness is not possible. Forgiveness requires justice. The perpetrators need to be punished, imprisoned and publicly convicted.

With justice I could forgive and then I could start to put the perpetrators far away from my mind. My future forgiveness also depends upon the government apologizing and acknowledging that they participated in this crime. Then they need to promise to create conditions where these kinds of crimes won’t be committed again.

Until I can bury my husband, the pain and trauma will remain. I’ve read a lot about grief, but grief of the families of the ‘disappeared’ is unlike any other kind because hope keeps remerging and hope can turn you crazy. I no longer talk to the wife of the politician who was

abducted with Anatoly because I cannot tolerate her belief after all these years that her husband is still alive... My task today is to keep the memory of my husband and the other 'disappeared' alive and to do this I will keep collecting the evidence, and I will keep waiting for justice...

Wow! What a story! Irina continues to campaign in order to raise awareness for the plight of all those who have 'disappeared' during the dictatorship of President Alexander Lukashenko, and she now lives in the U.S.

Now, even as Irina is demanding justice as a prerequisite to any talk of forgiveness, she has also taken concrete steps internally not to be stuck in bitterness or unrealistic hope. She is able to experience beauty and colour again, and she is able to turn her energy into meaningful protest and service on behalf of others beyond just herself.

So how does Irina's story square with the gospel story at the heart of our faith as Christians? In our reading we have Jesus who has preached and embodied radical love in a context where fear and hate are tools of political and religious leaders to keep the people controlled and imprisoned. Jesus can be ignored until he awakens people to a new vision of freedom from fear and hate. Now he's a problem that must be eliminated. How? There's a proven method that has worked every time. You capture him and publicly denounce and humiliate him. And then, you kill him to show how weak he is. Power is in the fear, the hate and the control.

But then, there's justice, but justice not as revenge or retaliation or bare-bones punishment. Justice in the Jesus story becomes something much richer. Jesus speaks words of forgiveness. But forgiveness is not about ignoring or downplaying the severity of the injustice being committed against him and all the crucified victims of the world. If Jesus is embodying God then every victim crucified on a cross is no longer forgotten. God is on that cross and it is no less than God who is crucified every time a person is made a victim. Rather than erasing the injustice, the cross shines a huge light on injustice demanding confession and redress.

But how do we redress injustice? How do we deal with the evil and the perpetrator of it in a way that leads to new life rather than an obsession with punishment? This is where the journey of forgiveness comes into play. Jesus speaks forgiveness even though he declares the guilty are guilty. Jesus embraces a criminal crucified beside him who knows he's deserving of punishment but is desperate for some mercy. Jesus surrenders his Spirit even though injustice still reigns. God in Jesus will not be defeated by the bitterness, hate, helplessness and hopelessness injustice breeds. God in Jesus will open a door to a different way forward, a way of fighting for justice that is not poisoned by injustice.

Irina is a courageous woman who is honest about her journey. Forgiveness is meaningless if there is no positive way to engage the perpetrators in their accountability and responsibility. At the same time, she is not imprisoned by their crimes toward her husband and thousands of other 'disappeared.' She is liberated and empowered to fight for justice with hope that something better has to be possible. Forgiveness is about the resurrection of hope. Forgiveness is about the acknowledgement that only God can help us find a way in our hearts to move past the injustice without getting buried in our grief, hate and bitterness.

It's not an easy path. The path is different for each of us. No two situations are alike exactly. But God can provide a way through. God's providence is always about resurrecting new life in the face of the horrors and tragedies that can befall any of us and often do. We don't let go evil and injustice. We let go the poison they can spread in us and through us. And when the injustice is severe, it is only God who can make possible the impossible – resurrecting love again when it has been crushed!

Let us pray: Bring peace into our hearts, O God, especially to those of us who have been marked by that which others have done to us or others. May some path be opened up, a path that fights for justice at every turn, but a justice that is always rooted in your resurrecting love; Amen.