

Forgiveness is not denial. Enemies are real.

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 February 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Epiphany 7C

**Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Gospel: Luke 6:27-38; Contemporary Reading:
“Peaceful ends by peaceful means,” by Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr.**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMcPf6m0E-U&t=27s>

US theologian Walter Wink suggested that the ultimate religious question for today should be “*How can we find God in our enemies?*”

I believe that the call to love enemies is the most amazing and challenging aspect of Jesus’ teaching. It is radical and it has inspired people such as Ghandi and Martin Luther King. In our time, it is the driving force for organisations such as Love Makes A Way, which employs non-violence direct action to draw attention to the plight of asylum seekers on Manus Island and Nauru; and also for the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change which has occupied the banks that would fund Adani and participated in flotillas in Newcastle harbour to stop coal reaching the ships that are essential for its earth-destroying global distribution.

However, this morning I want to add some provisos about enemies and forgiveness. I want to say up front that I am going to talk about abuse and that I am aware that within our community, there are people who have experienced abuse and people who have been, no doubt, abusers.

I am aware that the instruction to “*love your enemies...and pray for those who abuse you*” is heard now in very particular, disturbing ways in light of the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. It is heard in particularly disturbing ways by survivors of child abuse and survivors of domestic and family violence who have been told that the required Christian response to such violence is to love their perpetrators, to forgive them freely and to pray for them.

As one survivor said, remembering her Christian mother’s response to her on disclosing her father’s sexual abuse: “*I got abuse and he got prayer.*”

We must not read these words of Jesus in church without acknowledging that, spoken to victim/survivors of intimate violence – sexual or domestic violence – they have been, and continue to be, ways that the church has denied, enabled and perpetuated abuse.

So, before we think any more about what forgiveness is, we need to name what it is not – and how it should not be handled by the church.

So let me be clear. While I believe that forgiveness does have the power to free and transform it is not ever, ever, ever something that we should require of victim/survivors of abuse.

Yet inherent in Christian teaching that forgiveness is the response to harm done, we find a strongly rational and cognitive expectation that a person who has been abused or assaulted should be able to decide by an act of conscious choice - to forget that has happened - and to carry on with his or her life as if nothing has happened.

Underlying this expectation that we place on people is the theological belief that the grace of God or the power of the Spirit can override any human feelings or memories and in effect recreate a prior naivety or an innocence.

In therapeutic contexts too, unilateral forgiveness has been advocated to help the victim be freed from the power of the abuser and the abuse. I have some sympathy with this, but it too often ignores any ethical or communal dimension of responsibility for abuse. It keeps the process private and places responsibility for resolving the effects of abuse on the person who has been abused.

In Christian circles the deeply problematic idea of unconditional forgiveness has been taught and required as a way of bringing the offender to recognition of the wrongdoing that they have done. As if forgiveness on the part of the victim, unconditional love on the part of the victim, is the tool that will cause the offender to change. Such teaching is nothing but spiritually abusive.

Forgiveness does not mean denying what has been done. You do not have to forget in order to forgive. Loving our enemies does not mean that our enemies are not our enemies. Those who wish to harm us, those who do not acknowledge the humanity of people because of their status in the family, because of their race, gender, sexuality, economic status, religion, because they are asylum-seekers; those people are enemies, not friends. Those who sexually violate the bodily integrity of others, whether family members, church community members, or strangers are not friends of the person who has been abused. They are enemies.

The first step in responding to the call to love one's enemies is to name them enemies — to declare the enmity between us, and to proclaim our struggle for life, livelihood and well-being. To do anything else is to collude with the enemy.

Colluding with the enemy is most emphatically not what Jesus is asking when he suggests things like turning the other cheek. This text has been terribly misunderstood. It has been misconstrued in ways that maintain existing power relations of dominance and oppression. It is not inviting us to be doormats. It is not asking us to deny the violence done to them and to others.

I have preached before about the interpretation of liberation theologians and Jesus Seminar scholars which sees in Jesus' words instructions for non-violent resistance, particularly the turning of the other cheek in a way that resists the person assaulting from using backhand slap, the usual way the powerful insulted and diminished servants or slaves. Turning the other cheek means that the master cannot land another backhand slap. Instead of turning away, shamed, the one assaulted looks the master in the eye, non-violently asserting humanity and equality.

In addition to not requiring collusion there are some other things that the church should be saying abuse survivors in regard to Jesus' teaching.

1. I think we have to start by saying - we do not require you - you do not have to - forgive anyone. Anyone - be they family, friend, minister, therapist - anyone - who pressures you to forgive your abuser before you're ready to do that, is at best ignorant, and at worst harbouring their own terrible reasons for desiring your pain to disappear. They want that to happen for their sake or for the reputation of the community. Our advice should be that they should be ignored, because people who are survivors have reality to deal with.
2. Another thing we could say is that forgiveness is not a blanket state of being. It's related to particular offences or injuries. Forgiveness has no meaning outside the context of a specific offense. And offenses vary. Someone saying undermining or untrue things about you behind your back is one kind of offence; sexually violating you is an entirely different order of transgression. So, if you are a survivor, do not swallow the spiritual Kool-Aid that insists that healing and forgiveness are inseparable. Insisting that an abused person "forgive" their abuser only perpetuates abuse. Part of healing may, in time, lead to regarding the abuser more dispassionately, perhaps seeing what in their life or background contributed to their entitlement, abuse, and lack of empathy. But forgiveness per se is not a pre-condition for healing.
3. Speaking of forgiveness, in light of sexual abuse of children, means recognising that abusers of children depend upon the complicity-induced guilt of their victims. They will use the involuntary physical response to abuse as a weapon to ensure that victims blame themselves and despise themselves sexually. Spiritually, what is required is not a call to forgiveness but the repeated assurance that God loves them and that what happened to them is not their fault; that the light of a new beginning outside of the darkness within which the offender has enveloped them - that that light is calling to them, and that they are free to step into it.
4. And I think we need to say that, even if the offender asks the victim/survivor for forgiveness, there is still no obligation. Repentance precedes forgiveness. The onus is on the offender to assure the victim/survivor that their forgiveness is not expected nor required; and to honour the desire, if it is expressed, to remove themselves from the life of the victim. Even if the victim does choose to forgive, it does not require letting the offender back into their life.
5. Forgiveness is not once and for all. For someone who has been abused in the context of an intimate relationship, or by a person in a position of trust or leadership, the wounding may be at every level of their being. Sometimes they may feel healed, may even feel compassion or forgiveness toward the offender. At other times, weeks, months or years later, they may again experience isolation, betrayal, bitterness, anger and raw pain. It is important that victim/survivors are reassured that there is nothing wrong or strange about this; that such fluctuations are part of the process; to reassure them that they are not going to drown, that they have the known different responses before, that they know how to keep calm, to breathe and to swim safely back to a sheltering shore.

Jesus teaching aside for a while, this kind of understanding, and not the requirement to forgive and to pray for abusers needs to be the starting point of the church's response to abuse. Only from this place of being listened to, of being accompanied and reassured is the victim-survivor ever going to be in a position to choose to hear Jesus words. And then what they do with these words is up to them.

At some point in their journey they may ask themselves what it means to forgive - and I do believe that the Christian tradition has things to offer in understanding non-coercive forgiveness.

There are Christian theologians who are speaking creatively about forgiveness, in ways that are life-giving and liberating. One of them is the unconventional Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber. She has described mistreatment and abuse as a chains that binds us, and she's talked about the power of forgiveness in breaking the chains.

So, there's so much more that could be said about forgiveness – and it deserves an entire other sermon – which you don't have time for this morning. But I want to conclude with her words about forgiveness, and about a way of recasting forgiveness that honours the experience of the moral agency of people who are survivors and victims. She says:

"Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn't actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we're not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So what if forgiveness, rather than being a pansy way to say, 'It's okay,' is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it's saying, 'What you did was so not okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.'? Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter. And free people are dangerous people. Free people aren't controlled by the past. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And that's worth fighting for." (<https://sojo.net/articles/sermon-forgiveness>)

This real, raw understanding seems to me to be in accordance with the liberating impulse within all of Jesus' teaching. When the time comes – for each of us - we may consider why he calls us to contemplate forgiveness and prayer for abusers – in our own time.

And then, Jesus asks us to consider: if I can be forgiven, redeemed and transformed, can I also believe that such wonders can be worked in anyone? Loving our enemies is seeing our oppressors through the prism of the commonwealth of God—not only as they are now but also as they can become: transformed by the power of God, the ground of our being, the source of love.

In the face of all the evil that exists in the world, in the face of evil that continues to be done in our name on Manus Island and Nauru, and in the face of the failure of the churches to offer justice and compassion to the abused, it makes no sense to hold on to small hopes.

We are emboldened now to join the sacred in something bigger,
the transformation of people and societies to reflect the nature of creation,
the original blessing of the sacred,
to reflect the nature of Divine Presence who loves us all, and is in us all.