

Chaplain's Corner - March, 2017

One aspect of life that is pretty well universal is the experience of being let down or betrayed by someone we have trusted. It is also pretty safe to assume that we have, ourselves, also been in the role of the one who disappointed or betrayed the trust of someone else. The pain arising from such breeches of trust can cut very deep and the closer we are to the other person, the deeper the wound that arises from the sense of abandonment, rejection or betrayal.

If we look at the scriptures, it is not hard to find clear examples of such betrayal and wounds in close relationships. God also gives us some pretty clear instructions on how we should handle these events when they eventually, if not inevitably, occur in our lives.

Perhaps the best known and one of the most useful examples of God's heartfelt response to betrayal is laid out for us in the story of how Peter reacted at the time of Christ's arrest, trial and post resurrection interaction with Him on the beach. As it is written in Matthew's gospel (15:15-16), Peter was the first (and at the time only) one of the disciples to answer to Jesus' question "Who do you say I am?" with the clear assertion that He was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Then, following Christ's instituting the ritual and emblems of the Lord's Supper and predicting that all of the disciples would be made to stumble that very night, Peter was the one disciple to boldly predict that "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be." (Mark 14:29). Jesus, knowing both Peter's heart and being able to see things from a divine, omnipotent perspective then predicted that before the crowing of the rooster in the coming morning, Peter would deny Him three times.

As Jesus foresaw, following Peter's somewhat impetuous and violent reaction to the arrest of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (an action for which Jesus had to do some emergency cosmetic surgery to re-attach the ear of the servant of the high priest), once Jesus was hauled away to be tried by the Sanhedrin, Peter as well as the rest of the disciples "forsook Him and fled" (Mark 14:50). Peter was, however, by his ongoing love for the Lord, drawn to the courtyard of the high priest to observe what happened but as we are aware from the telling of the story many times, while standing near a fire to warm himself in the dead of the night Peter was approached by a servant girl from the house who recognized him as one of Jesus' disciples and confronted him with that fact. Peter denied it and began to move away from her as he heard a rooster crow in the distance. The servant girl did not desist and she told some of the others standing nearby that he was a follower of Jesus and he again denied it to her and those she was talking to. Some of the others who had heard the accusation and Peter's denial shortly afterward approached Peter and confronted him once again, noting that his speech and accent were that of a Galilean and that he was surely one of Christ's followers. Peter at that point began to curse and swear, "I do not know this Man of whom you speak!" Just at that point in time the rooster crowed again for the second time, bring into Peter's mind Jesus' prediction of his denying Him in just the way it transpired and as Peter thought about it he broke down left the courtyard and "wept bitterly." (Matthew 26:75).

Peter is not heard of again until after Christ's death and resurrection, as he was apparently so shaken by his loss of courage that he could not even watch or be among the crowd of witnesses who included Jesus' mother, many of the women who had been follower's and even John, the "beloved" disciple whom Jesus asked to care for his mother while he hung on the cross. From his brave assertion that he would never be among the ones to be scattered or abandon Jesus to running away and cowering in fear while the one he recognized as the Messiah hung and died on the cross, Peter must have felt like a total wretch and as being completely unworthy/worthless at that most depressing point of his life.

But as the radio broadcaster, Paul Harvey, used to say: Now for the rest of the story. What Peter did not understand, despite the repeated hints given to them by Jesus, is that Jesus would not remain in the grave past three days and that on the third day He would rise again to demonstrate that His sacrifice had defeated death, our wages of sin (Mark 9:31, Luke 9:21). Peter was the first of the disciples to enter the empty tomb after hearing from the women who went to prepare the body with burial spices and he then observed that the burial clothes were left empty on the shelf of the tomb. He was also among the group of disciples who were gathered together behind closed doors when Christ suddenly appeared amongst them and showed them His pierced hands and feet to assure them He was indeed alive again. But Peter must still have felt deeply conflicted and unsure of what his part was to be in Christ's plans, for shortly after this deeply moving reunion with Jesus he reverted to his old, familiar lifestyle and went back to fishing with several of the other disciples. While Jesus had earlier told them that they would become fishers of men, in the midst of the chaos and turmoil of what they had just experienced, it seems they lost sight of that God given objective and went back to something they knew from long experience. As told in the gospel of John, however, the group fished all night without any success and at the morning's dawn Jesus called to them from the shore and directed them to cast the net to the right side of the boat and they suddenly had a catch that was so large they could not haul it into the boat. Peter at that point in time suddenly realized who was talking to them from the shore and he jumped into the sea and swam to Him immediately.

After a feast on the fish that they caught with the Lord's direction, Jesus and Peter had a heartfelt discussion, during which He asked Peter three times if he loved Him, with Peter repeatedly asserting that he did. Jesus' response to Peter was to feed and tend His sheep and then he finished with the command to "Follow Me." (John 21:15-19). Just as Peter had denied Christ three times on the night of the trial, Christ lead him into professing his love three times on that morning on the shore, giving Peter a clear message that he was forgiven and was being entrusted with the responsibility to tend for and nurture those that Christ was leaving in his care.

What can we gain from this part of the gospel message? What is it's message to each of us in our own lives? Perhaps the most central feature of the story is similar to that of the response of the abandoned and betrayed father of the Prodigal son, that God as our heavenly Father is eager to forgive and restore us into close relationship with Him, if we are willing to face our sin, out past failures and come back to Him with a desire to be close again. Nothing we have

done will change the love God has in His heart for us and while we may grieve and disappoint Him repeatedly through our choices and rebellious ways, He is always ready to open His arms and accept us back again. Indeed, prior to Christ being crucified, He responded to Peter's question about how many times should he forgive another who sins against him that: "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22). By that Jesus was clearly stating that, like God, we are called upon to continue to forgive and to reach out in love to those who hurt us or disappoint us, even when they do not seem to want to change or continue to do the things that wound us. Jesus also told to Peter at that time the parable of the unforgiving servant who was forgiven a debt of a 10 thousand talents but then dealt harshly with a fellow servant who owed him just a hundred denarii, describing the unforgiving servant as "wicked" and as then being thrown in jail, with the moral of that story being that we are called upon to forgive each other if we are to receive God's forgiveness and blessing.

A lack of forgiveness in our own hearts is like a cancer that eats at us from within and from God's word we have clear direction to recognize it and to work on forgiving even those who have betrayed and hurt us deeply. But sometimes it is hard to recognize when we are harbouring such bitterness toward someone, especially as we all tend to rationalize and project blame as natural defenses rather than being honest with ourselves. But the poison of unforgiveness has observable impact on our lives. We can usually see it through the presence of a number of specific problems or reactions, including: 1) Pride: focussing on how much I have been wronged, 2) Faultfinding: dwelling over and ruminating about the faults of others, 3) Avoidance: avoid being around others with whom I have had conflict, 4) Silence: refusing to speak or share my feelings in a healthy manner, 5) Isolation: withdrawing emotionally from someone who has hurt me, 6) Unfaithfulness: unnecessarily sharing personal information or gossip to hurt the other person, 7) Hopelessness: lacking faith that God can work for the good in my situation and 8) Resentment: holding onto anger until it turns into bitterness.

Even if we accept that God is calling us to forgive those who have betrayed or hurt us, it is not always easy to do. We are human and struggle against our own sinful nature, which craves to attack and destroy rather than forgive. It may be helpful to remember that forgiving is a process and may not be just a one-step decision. It also helps to keep in mind that forgiveness does not mean approving of what happened or saying it didn't matter like sweeping the issue under a carpet. It is a conscious decision on our part to set aside our "rights" for revenge or demands for compensation, to purge from our system the poison of resentment and bitterness that eats at us like an acid from inside. One way of approaching this process is to consider stages that can be useful in moving us to God's will in this area, using an acronym: REACH.

R stands for Recall. We must not deny what happened or pretend it did not hurt us if we are to be able to heal from it, but strive to remember what occurred calmly and objectively.

E stands for Empathy. Try to understand what the other person may have been going through or their motivations at the time of the offence, to attempt to feel with them and not demonize them as 100 percent evil.

A is for Altruism. In the act of forgiving we are giving an altruistic gift to the other person, even if they don't "deserve" it or have asked for it directly. Forgiveness is something God has called us to do for our own sake to clear our hearts of the poison of bitterness, not just to give to the select few that we see as deserving it.

C is for Commitment. Commit publicly to forgive the other person. By speaking it aloud or in writing, by telling someone else that you trust as a friend of your decision or, when appropriate, writing or sending a message to the offender about your decision to forgive can all help solidify the act in your own life.

H is for Hold on. Forgiveness does not mean that the memory or even the hurt and angry feelings about what happened in the past will suddenly disappear. We may well experience flashbacks in which the event comes back to memory and triggers deep emotional reactions over and over again. But it helps to hold onto the commitment that you have made to put aside our legal rights and pursue resolution of the conflict as God has called us to do.

I hope that all of us can respond to God's calling in this area of our lives, even if it is one of the most difficult and demanding things we may have to face. Just as in the 12 step programmes that most are familiar with that tell us to make amends with others we have harmed, we should also recognize that holding onto the bitterness of unforgiveness can be a poison that constantly drives us back into self-defeating and addictive behaviours. But with God's help and with a willing heart, even in this most challenging aspect of our lives we can make real changes that will restore relationships, heal our heartbreaks and open us for receiving God's blessings and allow us to focus not just on ourselves but on reaching out and helping to care for the other sheep in the pasture we all share in this world.

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