

Theme: True forgiveness

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we gather this day recalling your son's great triumphal entrance into Jerusalem and his disgraceful execution at the hands of the authorities: may we be washed with your eternal love, forgiving our sins and restoring us to perpetual union with you, through him who died so we may live, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Discerning Reader published the following story. In our increasingly graceless culture, where can we find the motivation to give? And how do we learn to forgive when forgiving seems counter-intuitive or even futile? These are some of the really big questions that Miroslav Volf tackles in his book *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. Volf provides a penetrating analysis of our western culture and the Biblical basis for giving and forgiving that runs counter to this culture.

In this book Volf lays a strong foundation for living a beautiful life of selfless giving and forgiving; a beautiful life that runs counter to our deep inclinations of selfishness and competition. Volf begins with a great theological discussion of giving as really participating in the giving life of God.

God is the first and really the only giver. We are able to simply pass on the gifts to others, and in the meantime gain benefit from the gifts. Giving is only possible when all of our selfishness is removed, when there is no real benefit to us, when there will be no pay back; or at least no expectation of any of these things.

This kind of giving becomes the foundation for forgiving, in Volf's mind. Forgiving becomes a mixed gift. Forgiveness requires both a condemnation of the act and a promise not to hold the other person accountable for that act. When we tell someone we forgive them, we accuse them of doing something that deserves forgiveness, but at the same time we promise not to hold them accountable for that act.

Volf uses a story from his family to powerfully illustrate this: I was one then, and my five-year-old brother, Daniel, had slipped through the large

gate in the courtyard where we had an apartment. He went to the nearby small military base—just two blocks away—to play with “his” soldiers. On earlier walks through the neighborhood, he had found some friends there—soldiers in training, bored and in a need of diversion even if it came from an energetic five-year-old.

On that fateful day in 1957, one of them put him on a horse-drawn bread wagon. As they were passing through the gate on a bumpy cobblestone road, Daniel leaned sideways and his head got stuck between the door post and the wagon. The horses kept going. He died on the way to (the) hospital—a son lost to parents who adored him and an older brother that I would never know.

Aunt Milica should have watched him. But she didn't. She let him slip out, she didn't look for him, and he was killed. But my parents never told me that she was partly responsible. They forgave her.

... The pain of that terrible loss still lingers on, but bitterness and resentment against those responsible are gone. It was healed at the foot of the cross as my mother gazed on the Son who was killed and reflected about the God who forgave. Aunt Milica was forgiven, and there was no more talk of her guilt, not even talk of her having been guilty. As far as I was concerned, she was innocent.

Volf uses this powerful story to tease out the various aspects of true forgiveness, a forgiveness which is really allowing God to forgive the other through us. Volf grounds all the actions of giving and forgiving in the work of God and Jesus through us, a work which needs to be accepted to be effective.

Both our transformation and the imputation of Christ's righteousness depends on our union with Christ. And so does forgiveness, the fact that God doesn't count our sin against us. ...

How do we receive forgiveness? How do we receive Christ who brings with him new life and forgiveness? The way we receive anything from God: by faith. ... What does faith do? It embraces Christ. (Martin Luther wrote, “Faith takes hold of Christ and has Him present, enclosing him as the ring encloses the gem.” ...

Faith is our hands open to receive Christ whom God has given. If I am giving you a present, all you need to do is open your hands, and it will be yours. God gives, faith receives. And because God gives even before the hands of faith open to receive, faith never goes away empty-handed. To have faith is to have Christ and, with Christ, a new life and forgiveness of sins.

It is this new life in Christ, and our forgiveness offered to us from God that allows us to forgive others. When we forgive we are passing on the forgiveness of God; as Volf puts it, when we forgive, we put our signature underneath God's. Volf weaves "his rich reflections around the sturdy frame of Paul's vision of God's grace and Martin Luther's interpretation of that vision", explains Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, in an endorsement of the book.

This book takes a deep plunge into the murky waters of the Christian ability to give and forgive within a culture that calls simply for justice and revenge. Volf represents the Biblical call to love others as we have been loved by God, to forgive as we have been forgiven. He recognizes that this may seem like a Utopian dream, but urges us to pursue this dream because through God's Spirit we may just find it obtainable.

– Discerning Reader (2008)

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, we give you thanks and praise for your gift of forgiveness: may we emulate that great gift you gave us so that we may forgive others, being signs of your great love, though your son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Text: **Luke 22:14-23:56** (NRSV)

¹⁴ When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵ He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶ for I tell you, I will not eat it^c until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸ for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹ Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup

^c Other ancient authorities read *never eat it again*

that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.^{d 21} But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table.²² For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!”²³ Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

²⁴ A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.²⁵ But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors.²⁶ But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

²⁸ “You are those who have stood by me in my trials; ²⁹ and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom,³⁰ so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

³¹ “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded^e to sift all of you like wheat,³² but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”³³ And he said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!”³⁴ Jesus^f said, “I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.”

³⁵ He said to them, “When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?” They said, “No, not a thing.”³⁶ He said to them, “But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one.³⁷ For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless’; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.”³⁸ They said, “Lord, look, here are two swords.” He replied, “It is enough.”

³⁹ He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him.⁴⁰ When he reached the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”^{g 41} Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed,⁴² “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” [[⁴³ Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength.⁴⁴ In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]]^{h 45} When he got up from prayer, he came to

^d Other ancient authorities lack, in whole or in part, verses 19b-20 (*which is given ... in my blood*)

^e Or *has obtained permission*

^f Gk *He*

^g Or *into temptation*

^h Other ancient authorities lack verses 43 and 44

the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”⁴¹

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; ⁴⁸ but Jesus said to him, “Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?” ⁴⁹ When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, “Lord, should we strike with the sword?” ⁵⁰ Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. ⁵¹ But Jesus said, “No more of this!” And he touched his ear and healed him. ⁵² Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, “Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? ⁵³ When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!”

⁵⁴ Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest’s house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵ When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶ Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, “This man also was with him.” ⁵⁷ But he denied it, saying, “Woman, I do not know him.” ⁵⁸ A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “Man, I am not!” ⁵⁹ Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, “Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.” ⁶⁰ But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about!” At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. ⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.” ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

⁶³ Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; ⁶⁴ they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, “Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?” ⁶⁵ They kept heaping many other insults on him.

⁶⁶ When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. ⁶⁷ They said, “If you are the Messiah,^j tell us.” He replied, “If I tell you, you will not believe; ⁶⁸ and if I question you, you will not answer. ⁶⁹ But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” ⁷⁰ All of them asked, “Are you, then, the Son of God?” He said to them, “You say that I am.” ⁷¹ Then they said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!”

23 Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus^a before Pilate. ² They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes

i Or *into temptation*

j Or *the Christ*

a Gk *him*

to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.”^{b 3} Then Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” He answered, “You say so.”⁴ Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man.”⁵ But they were insistent and said, “He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.”

⁶ When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷ And when he learned that he was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. ⁹ He questioned him at some length, but Jesus^c gave him no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. ¹² That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

¹³ Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵ Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶ I will therefore have him flogged and release him.”^d

¹⁸ Then they all shouted out together, “Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!”¹⁹ (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰ Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; ²¹ but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” ²² A third time he said to them, “Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.”²³ But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. ²⁴ So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵ He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

²⁶ As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸ But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the

^b Or *is an anointed king*

^c Gk *he*

^d Here, or after verse 19, other ancient authorities add verse 17, *Now he was obliged to release someone for them at the festival*

mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’³¹ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

³² Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus^e there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[³⁴ Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”]]^f And they cast lots to divide his clothing.³⁵ And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah^g of God, his chosen one!”³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine,³⁷ and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”³⁸ There was also an inscription over him,^h “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deridingⁱ him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah?^j Save yourself and us!”⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?”⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into^k your kingdom.”⁴³ He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land^l until three in the afternoon,⁴⁵ while the sun’s light failed;^m and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.⁴⁶ Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last.⁴⁷ When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.”ⁿ⁴⁸ And when all the

e Gk *him*

f Other ancient authorities lack the sentence *Then Jesus ... what they are doing*

g Or *the Christ*

h Other ancient authorities add *written in Greek and Latin and Hebrew (that is, Aramaic)*

i Or *blaspheming*

j Or *the Christ*

k Other ancient authorities read *in*

l Or *earth*

m Or *the sun was eclipsed*. Other ancient authorities read *the sun was darkened*

n Or *righteous*

crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts.⁴⁹ But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

⁵⁰ Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council,⁵¹ had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.⁵² This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.⁵³ Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid.⁵⁴ It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning.^o⁵⁵ The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid.⁵⁶ Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

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^o Gk *was dawning*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.