

Jesus— Supreme Forgiver

By Ron Allen

**“How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, “I tell you not seven times, but seventy times seven.”
(Matthew 18:21)**

These words of Jesus are set in a chapter that deals with the problem of the offensive brother. Jesus had said, “Confront the errant brother; if necessary take someone else along with you. If the brother is willing to acknowledge his fault, you have won your brother over. If not, then look on him as you would one outside the community.”

This begs the question: Is there nothing at all that can be done for the brother who does not repent? Yes! There is. Jesus went on to show that we are to learn to forgive repetitiously, generously—even when repentance by the offending person is not forthcoming.

Forgiveness is not some easy option for those with no stomach for confrontation. It is a necessity. All human relationships are precarious. They are hard to manage and easily disturbed. We are often irritated or disappointed in the way others treat us. Unless we have some mechanism by which we can process, positively, wrongs we inflict on each other, we shall fail in the art of living.

The religion of the Bible is very realistic. No attempt is made to paper over the cracks and blemishes in communal life. To speak of a problem called ‘sin’ is to be utterly practical. It must be remembered, though, that ‘sin’ cannot be limited to glaring

offenses like robbery and murder. These are just the tip of an iceberg of irregularities in human nature. Other transgressions may be hidden or else even have a façade of respectability. Envy, for example. Pride, vindictiveness, malice and greed. These are terribly damaging wherever they occur.

In Jesus’ story, the prodigal sins grossly. His wrongs are crude and easy to see. But the older, well-behaved brother, is full of bitterness, and his inner resentments prevent him from enjoying the company of his father and brother.

When Jesus speaks of an extravagant, spendthrift forgiveness, he is recognizing something dysfunctional in human life that requires frequent and far-reaching remedial attention. So, even after I have confronted the brother who sins against me, and even after he will not repent and enter into community with me, I can still reach out to him by maintaining a forgiving spirit toward him.

When the paralytic was brought to Jesus, he questioned: “Which is easier? To say rise up and walk or to say, your sins be forgiven?” Thus did Jesus indicate that forgiveness is not easy. Forgiveness is never cheap. It is arduous and exacting. There are many things that might be done in service to another. You may feed a hungry brother; clothe him if he is cold; take him to a hospital if he is sick. Yet none of these would cost as much as forgiving him if he had done you wrong.

There is an element of sacrifice in forgiveness; of self-substitution. In the act of forgiving, the wrong does not vanish. It is present in all its soreness, and the forgiver feels it and is crushed by it.

A woman appears on the evening news. Her son has been arrested for a terrible crime of violence. The community is vocally hostile. The news media joins in the call for swift retribution. Everyone is baying for this man’s blood. All—except his mother. She says: “He is my son. I love him. I will never give him up.” Does she count his crime less? No. She feels the measure of it more than all others. She has forgiveness in her heart but it is killing her. Loving someone doesn’t make forgiveness smooth. It makes it rough and jagged. It cuts and hurts. Which is easier? To make a sick person well, or to forgive?

In George Eliot’s, *Adam Bede*, Adam has eyes for pretty Hetty Sorrel. Adam is honest and plodding. Hetty is vain and shallow. But Adam is intent on marrying her. Along comes Arthur Donnithorne; swashbuckling and rich. He sweeps Hetty off her feet in a short affair, then leaves her. Later she is alone and pregnant; her life in ruins.

Donnithorne knows he has wrecked both Adam’s and Hetty’s lives. He comes to Adam, wretchedly, asking him to forgive him. Adam does forgive but not without anguish. “There’s a sort ’o damage sir,” he says to Donnithorne. “That can’t be made up for. . . it’s like a bit ’o bad workmanship; you never see the end o’ the mischief it’ll do.”

There is no experience as searching as forgiveness—both for forgiver and forgiven. In forgiveness, the drama of the human story is played out in utter poignancy. It is as if all the characters come to court. The chief actors are together in the same room. Victim and assailant; abuser and abused. They meet and face each other. But they are not alone. The wrong done is there as well. Its presence is palpable. The havoc