

## **“The Final Form of Love”**

As much as I enjoy presiding at weddings and civil unions, I often have a lurking concern. How many of the invited guests are able to enter into the happy couple's joy? I'm mindful that there have to be among the congregants people who are separated from their loved ones either by death or divorce or who are alone for whatever reason. My hope is that these people feel a part of this celebration.

Toward the end of my remarks to the couple I usually offer a prayer for lovers. I make it clear that this prayer is inclusive, that it isn't just for the couple, but that it is a prayer for all of us because I say what I believe to be true, which is that we're all called to be the best lovers that we can become in this life. I say this at the risk of sounding extravagant, sentimental, or simply injudicious.

A sermon on “The Final Form of Love” gives me a chance to spell out what I mean, which is that loving begins with loving ourselves and that loving ourselves is the other side of knowing ourselves and isn't this what life is all about? Not that I'm being original. Socrates and numerous Greek philosophers taught the same thing. “Know Thyself” was inscribed on Apollo's Oracle of Delphi Temple in Ancient Greece.

I don't believe that I'm saying anything original either when I say that knowing or loving ourselves are two sides of the same coin or that we can't really love others unless we do love ourselves. The author and philosopher Ken Nerburn writes: “If we cannot see the good in ourselves, we will not see the good in others.”

In almost the same breath he says that forgiving ourselves is the well-spring of all true forgiveness. And, at the same time, Nerburn sees self-forgiveness as being one of the hardest tasks that we face in life. He's talking about forgiving ourselves for who we are and for who we are not, which isn't always easy. It isn't always easy to be grateful for the shape our lives have taken.

Nerburn asks how many people go through life disappointed, feeling that their world is not enough. They are not intelligent or clever enough, pretty or handsome enough, rich or talented enough. Someone else got all the breaks. Rather than celebrate the gifts they have been given, their own uniqueness, they are imprisoned by their limitations.

In the end, it is all too easy to define ourselves by what we are not. Self-forgiveness is about forgiving ourselves for who we are not. I will never be Mother Theresa or Nancy Pelosi, but I will be someone who can listen, who can participate in people's joys and sorrows.

I do believe that self-forgiveness is central to becoming the best lovers we can become. And I don't think that love is easy, any more than is self-knowledge. I often quote whoever said that self-identity, knowing who you are, isn't just a problem for the young. It's a problem for all ages. It should haunt us into old age.

The Russian author Dostoevsky, in his last and greatest novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, speaking through one of his characters, goes so far as to say that not only is love not easy, "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." In the context of the story this may be easier to digest. We also need to take into account the life experience of an author who knew the meaning of harsh and dreadful.

Throughout the story, Dostoevsky expresses his own religious concerns. The two brothers, Ivan and Alyosha, are at opposite ends of the spectrum of belief and non-belief. Ivan cannot accept the existence of God because of the suffering of the innocent. Intellectually, he is inclined toward nihilism. Whereas Alyosha, his polar opposite, has chosen to join a nearby monastery. There, he becomes the disciple of a revered spiritual director, Father Zossima. The entire focus of this holy man's teaching and message is love. Some of his own brother monks are critical and find this message at times too simplistic.

One day a proud wealthy woman comes seeking spiritual counsel from Zossima. Not surprisingly, he tells her that the answer to her spiritual dilemma is "active love. Strive to love your neighbors actively and indefatigably." The closer you come to achieving this goal, says the holy man, the closer you will be to the truth. Gandhi taught something very similar, namely that the search for truth is inseparable from the struggle for justice.

The proud rich woman is not satisfied with the simplicity of Father Zossima's counsel. She claims that "she already does love humanity, so much so that she sometimes dreams of giving up everything to become a hospital nurse, a dream she would surely fulfill if it weren't for the abhorrent prospect of having to deal with human ingratitude (Ellsberg, p. 473). Her spiritual counselor responds in the memorable phrase, "love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."

Dealing with human ingratitude can be difficult and discouraging when it comes to loving your neighbor actively and indefatigably. Reinhold Niebuhr acknowledges as much in a responsive reading that we have in our own hymn book. It's entitled "We Must Be Saved." He puts it so discreetly that you hardly get it first time around. He could well have been addressing the proud woman in the novel or even himself when he writes in the final verse: "No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore, we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness."

I am certainly not inclined to make reference to the sobering thought of either Dostoevsky or Niebuhr in my wedding remarks. I still remember one groom-to-be making it very clear that he did not want the celebrant or presider to get too heavy in talking about the challenges a couple might face in their relationship. Apparently he had had some bad experiences in ceremonies he had attended in the past. I appreciated his concerns and assured him I had no intention of playing Cassandra, making dire predictions about the happy couple's future.

What I do like to do is simply expand the idea of love beyond what it is in dreams and then even into the larger community. That's why, when I say a prayer for lovers, I make it clear that the prayer is for all of us. The prayer is for expanding hearts. It goes like this: "Give us expanding hearts, Holy Creating Love, hearts that can take in all the beauty of the persons we love, expanding to the full scope of their becoming, extending through their time and space to welcome all they are and will become, their blossoming, trials and full growth, Even their diminishment and death. That is the lovingness to which we are called. Grace us with hearts for love's entire journey, from mysterious sunrise to mysterious sunset" (Cleary, p. 2).

I'm always in need of expanding my own heart. I struggle with being small-souled, with what is known as pusillanimity which literally does mean small-souled. For some reason, I like knowing a word for it, for what I need to work on. It takes a large-souled person to forgive. Gandhi's followers called him Mahatma, meaning "great soul."

Niebuhr says that forgiveness is the final form of love by which we are ultimately saved. I find the line that precedes this verse provocative and profound. "No virtuous act is quite so virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own. Therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness."

What is being suggested here? Could it mean that loving someone, whether friend or foe, might involve forgiving them for not appreciating our virtuous acts, for simply not appreciating us enough? If I'm mistaken, it's all Reinhold Niebuhr's fault for being too subtle. And yet he may be speaking to pusillanimous people like myself.

At this point in writing my sermon, I experienced a real moment of grace. I had been saying to myself "who am I to be writing about the final form of love being forgiveness, with my limited life experience?" It all seemed so presumptuous. And then the phone rang. It was a friend with a lot more life experience than myself. He asked did I have a minute. On the one hand, I appreciated his thoughtfulness; on the other, I wanted him to know that I was in the middle of writing a sermon that had a deadline. I knew he'd understand, having been a reporter himself. He wanted to know what the sermon was about. As soon as he heard the word "forgiveness," without any prompting he began to validate my own experience, that the hardest person to forgive is ourselves. At the same time, he was confirming what Ken Nerburn has written about in *Walking The Path of Forgiveness*, that self-forgiveness is one of the hardest tasks that we face in life—forgiving ourselves for who we are and for who we are not.

My friend immediately began to talk about how he felt when he heard about the tragedy that occurred last October on a Monday morning in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. He felt terribly humbled that 48 hours after a deranged man, father of three, broke into an Amish school and shot ten young girls, parents of the girls reached out in forgiveness to the family of Charles Roberts, the 32-year-old truck driver who committed the horrible crime.

Response to the tragedy broke down barriers between two communities that lived along

side each other, two centuries apart. Amish beliefs oblige them to live simply: no cars, phones or electricity.

Amish and non-Amish set aside their cultural differences for a while. Non-Amish were welcomed into Amish households for prayer vigils and prepared food for the grieving families. They drove the parents of the five girls who survived the attack to hospitals too far to reach by horse and buggy. The non-Amish, or the “English” as the Amish referred to those who live in the secular world, protected the privacy of their neighbors from the media.

When donations came in from around the country to help the families pay hospital bills, the Amish responded with their own generosity of spirit. They asked that a fund be set up for the Roberts family as well. At the wake of one of the girls, her father asked if his non-Amish neighbors knew the Roberts family. One of them said yes, but not well. “If you see them” he said, “please tell them that they are in our prayers.”

My friend, who was so struck by the largeness of soul on the part of this Amish community, was able to see whatever grudges he carried more clearly in the light of this kind of grace. Coincidentally, just when he called, I was doing research on a mother whose story of forgiveness I have never forgotten. I first heard about her when Morris Dees spoke at St. Michael’s College some time ago. Dees is the co-founder of the Southern Poverty Law Centre.

The story he told was about Beulah Mae Donald, mother of Michael Donald. One night in March of 1981, Michael—19 years old at the time—was on his way to a convenience store in Mobile, Alabama. Two men, members of the Ku Klux Klan, abducted him. They beat him, cut his throat and hung his body from a tree on a residential street.

The two Klansmen, Henry Hayes and James “Tiger” Knowles, were angry that an interracial jury had failed to convict another black man for killing a white police officer in Birmingham. For revenge, the Klansmen had selected Michael Donald at random and lynched him to intimidate other blacks.

After an all-too-brief investigation, the local police claimed that Donald was murdered as a result of a disagreement following a drug deal. Beulah Mae Donald knew her son, who worked part time at the *Mobile Press Register*, was not involved in drugs. She called in Jesse Jackson. After a protest march, the F.B.I. soon had a confession from Tiger Knowles. Both he and Henry Hayes were convicted in criminal court in 1983.

Beulah Mae was in the courtroom on the day of the conviction. Tiger Knowles turned to her after the sentencing, saying “How can you ever forgive me?” To which she replied, “I already have.”

The story does not end there. With the support of Morris Dees at the Southern Poverty Law Centre, Beulah Mae determined that she would use this case to try to destroy the KKK in Alabama. Her civil law suit against the United Klans of America took place in

February of '87. An all-white jury found the Klan responsible for the lynching and ordered it to pay \$7 million. The result: The Klan had to hand over all its assets, including its national headquarters in Tuscaloosa. The verdict marked the end of the United Klans, the same group that had beaten the Freedom Riders in '61, murdered civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo in '65, and bombed Birmingham's 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in '63.

The keys to the door and deed to the headquarters of one of the nation's KKK organizations were handed over to a 67-year-old black mother who drove the Klan unit into bankruptcy. One newspaper heading at the time read: "The woman who beat the Klan locked eyes with her son's murderer and said, 'I do forgive you.'"

Like my friend who found inspiration in the forgiving spirit of the Amish parents who lost their daughters, Beulah Mae Donald's story expands my heart. It testifies that the final form of love is forgiveness.

The question still remains: Where does this kind of forgiveness come from? Where is its source? My own faith tells me that it comes from grace, the depths of human goodness. And where does this grace come from? I honestly cannot say. Like love, it's a mystery, maybe even the mystery at the heart of being. Some people call it divine or affective energy. Some people call it the relational liveliness that energizes the universe. Some call it God. Whatever it is, I choose to believe in it and pray that we will be graced with expanding hearts for love's entire journey, from mysterious sunrise to mysterious sunset.

May it be so.

**Bibliography:**

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