

See How They Love One Another

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The church, for all its faults and foibles, provides us with practice and conditioning for the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. Just as athletes train and practice some sport, so our life within Christian communities trains us for the moments in our families, workplaces, and society when we will need words, strength, and the Holy Spirit's wisdom.

A congregation sings “Blessed Assurance” as Depression-era images of small-town Texas fill the screen. As the hymn ends, the camera settles on the Spalding family—husband, wife, son, daughter—saying grace. Their Sunday dinner is soon interrupted, however. Mr. Spalding is the sheriff, and he has to go down to the train tracks to deal with Wiley, a drunken young man who is playing with a gun. Within hours, both will be dead—Spalding accidentally shot, and Wiley, who is black, lynched.

The 1984 film *Places in the Heart*¹ tells the story of Mrs. Spalding's struggle to keep her home and family intact in the face of miserable economic odds and human wrongdoing that ranges from the predictable to the obscene. Her son Frank misbehaves in the usual twelve-year-old ways. Wayne, her brother-in-law, is unfaithful to Margaret, her sister and best friend. Mr. Denby, the banker, shows no mercy as the date of her mortgage payment draws near. A group of Klansmen is barely prevented

from killing Moses, the black man who has helped her bring in a good crop of cotton.

This film exposes sin with clarity and vigor. But it does not give sin the last word. The final scene takes place in a congregation on another Sunday morning. The preacher rises to read the lesson from 1 Corinthians 13: “Love is patient; love is kind, not jealous or boastful. Love never

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ends.” Quietly, Margaret puts her hand in Wayne’s, offering forgiveness; their marriage will be renewed. When the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, Wayne passes the bread to his wife, then the tray of cups. The bread and juice continue from hand to hand through the congregation to Mr. Denby, and to

Moses, and to some men whose names we do not know (are they Klansmen?), and to Frank, and finally to Mrs. Spalding. She serves her husband, the sheriff, who is now seated beside her, and he then serves Wiley. “Peace of God,” they say.

In this scene, fictional characters experience the forgiveness that is represented to real-life worshipers in Christian congregations week after week. When we are worshipping God, we who so readily become stuck in our greed and hostilities are offered again and again the opportunities to perceive, receive, and reflect to others the merciful face of God.

Almost in spite of ourselves, we who can cherish our grievances with astonishing fierceness find ourselves rehearsing, week after week, the words and gestures that offer release from bondage to the past. We confess that we are sinners in a prayer spoken in unison with some of the very folks whom we have betrayed—folks who have also betrayed us. We receive assurance that in Christ we—and they—are forgiven. We hear the Bible read and the Word proclaimed, and we are convicted of our sin and shown the possibility of new life. We are invited to the Lord’s table to drink from the cup of Christ’s blood, “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” We are sent out to love and serve God and our neighbors.

Those who join in this praying and listening and supping and serving know that entering the realm of reconciliation re-presented within each Christian service of worship is no easy matter. Sometimes a Margaret cannot take the hand of a Wayne, and rarely are a Moses and a Wiley

found at church with the Spalding and Denby families. Christian worship is the gift of God, but it is also the work of sinners; it does not presume that congregations are full of saintly people who forgive and accept forgiveness with ease. Its focus is on One who, though now risen, still bears in his hands and feet the marks of a terrible death. Around *this* Lord's table is gathered a community threatened not only from without but also from within—a community whose first members were Judas, who would betray him; Peter, who would deny him; and ten others, who would abandon him.²

Even so, this community is the one within which we are called to anticipate, prepare for, and taste the realm where all of us fallen ones will share the peace of God. And so we boldly pray in this company the prayer that Jesus taught. “Forgive us,” we ask God (*us*, not *me* or *them*); and then in the very next breath we name ourselves, before God and in one another's hearing, as people who likewise forgive those who sin against us. Commenting on this petition, the fourth-century preacher John Chrysostom said that it does not mean that God will not forgive us if we do not forgive others; instead, he argued, the petition emphasizes the relationship between the forgiveness we receive and that which we offer our neighbors because “God wills for us a great benefit, namely, ‘cementing’ us to others who are fellow members of the body of Christ by means of love, casting out what is brutish in us, and quenching wrath.”³

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who died in a Nazi prison camp only days before the end of World War II, wrote insightfully about forgiveness as an aspect of life in Christian community. Life together, he argued, forms Christians for forgiveness precisely by ridding them of the illusion that they can live without forgiveness! When things go smoothly, he noted, Christians readily get the idea that their own good will and high ideals have laid the foundation and determined the shape of the community's shared life. Sin and the messiness that generally attends it quickly give the lie to that false notion, however. When things become difficult (as they will), those who think that their own gifts are responsible for the existence of community will have only “wishful dreaming” to rely on. “They act as if they have to create the Christian community, as if their visionary ideal binds the people together. Whatever does not go their way, they call a failure. When their idealized image is shattered, they see the community breaking into pieces. So they first become accusers of other Christians in the community, then accusers of God, and finally the desperate accusers of themselves.”⁴

This account is a reminder that many a Christian congregation has come into existence as a consequence of schism stemming directly from a failure to forgive. Quarreling has led to bitterness and resentment, and

eventually certain members of Redeemer by the Gas Station have left to found Prince of Peace on Division Road just outside the city limits. Indeed, two struggling congregations of the same denomination exist in some small towns mainly so disgruntled members of each can have someplace to go where they don't have to worship and pray with old, or perhaps newfound, enemies. This unfortunate wound on the body of Christ not only causes grief and shame among its members, it also represents a major scandal, a stumbling block for the world and for the "little ones" the searching shepherd of Jesus' parables is loathe to lose. "See how they love one another!" has a sarcastic ring to it in some circumstances.

Against this familiar human rush to brokenness, Bonhoeffer suggested that Christians should in fact give thanks when trouble happens among us and our immediate vocation becomes a carefully focused need to forgive. For it is then that we can see—if we will only look—that it is not a human ideal but God's forgiving love that makes community possible. "Because God already has laid the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive. We thank God for what God has done for us. We thank God for giving us other Christians who live by God's call, forgiveness, and promise. We do not complain about what God does not give us; rather we are thankful for what God does give us daily. And is not what has been given us enough: other believers who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of God's grace?" Further, Bonhoeffer asks, "will not the very moment of great disillusionment with my brother or sister be incomparably wholesome for me because it so thoroughly teaches me that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ? The bright day of Christian community dawns wherever the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting."⁵

Bonhoeffer wrote these words as he pondered his experiences in a tightly knit residential community of Christians studying for the ministry in the dark and threatening days of pre-war Germany. A typical Christian congregation is a very different sort of community, but the dynamics of sin and the need for forgiveness remain the same. Thus, when painful division and disruption threaten us, we should give thanks—not for the sin that has befallen us, but for the opportunity to put our gifts into practice.

Most of these opportunities come not inside the confines of church life, but in the broader context of our families, workplaces, and communities. In these arenas of life we learn that the church, for all its faults and foibles,

has been providing us all along with practice and conditioning for the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. Just as athletes train and practice some sport, so our life within Christian communities trains us for the moments when we will need words, strength, and the Holy Spirit's wisdom.

The vision of the divine shepherd who can't abide the loss of a single sheep makes us loath to settle for forms of reconciliation that leave anyone outside. A lifetime of hymn-singing and prayer gives us words at the ready when otherwise our tongues might be tightly tied. The Lord's table transforms all the other tables at which we sit, day in and day out, with sinners who need to be loved and spoken to no matter what's passed between us since last we shared a meal.

Neither the church nor its members live for themselves. We live instead as God's servants on behalf of a world that lives too deeply in alienation, bitterness, and various states of war. At our best, we who make up Christ's body in this world offer to this world a new model for handling the sins that grow profusely as crabgrass. And as we offer our energies and ourselves to that effort, we find that we grow daily into the new selves that have been given us all in baptism.⁶

When we do this, we embody the very gifts we practice receiving and sharing every time we worship the God who is their source. We no longer regard each other as we once did, or from a worldly point of view. No matter what happens among us, we see in each other not only a fellow sinner, but also one of the redeemed for whom Christ died. Within the fellowship of the church, we see each other in baptismal garments, the working clothes of the new creation, each and every day. In our sanctuaries as well as around our tables at home, we break bread that comes not only from our own labors, but also from Christ who is our true host.

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If that scene at the end of *Places in the Heart* went on a while longer, we would see some remarkable exchanges of bread and cup that would include the whole body of Christ, all who have ever shared in the grace of this Lord's supper. Somewhere in that mix would be old Athanasius giving the bread to the once angry opponents who exiled him seven times over disagreements of doctrine. John Hus, John Wycliff, and Thomas Cranmer would appear as well, offering the blood of Christ to men who in

righteous anger burned them at the stake as an act of praise to God. Sooner or later the congregation would break into one of those hymns that sixteenth-century Mennonites and other Anabaptists composed on their way to being drowned in their own baptisteries by Catholics and Lutherans. Soldiers whom we sent to destroy one another in all our many wars, and enemies of every other kind as well, would pass the “Peace of God” from one to the other. “Amens” would rise up from worshippers of every nation and race.

And somewhere near the end of the last pew we would see ourselves passing the bread and sharing the peace—one more prodigal son or daughter, one more older brother or sister, falling at last into the embrace of the ever-waiting, always-forgiving Father.

NOTES

1 *Places in the Heart*, produced by Tri-Star Pictures, was written and directed by Robert Benton. Sally Field won an Oscar as best actress for her portrayal of Edna Spalding.

2 Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 53,114-115.

3 Arland Hultgren, “Forgive Us, As We Forgive,” *Word & World*, XVI (Summer 1996), 290.

4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 36.

5 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 36-37.

6 L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), chapter 1.



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