

Blue Sunday 4

Sweet Forgiveness?

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Once again dear people, we have gathered on the third Sunday of January; here we are—putting ourselves on notice, giving ourselves due warning, that according to some very unscientific but arresting research—tomorrow, that is, the Third Monday of January, is the most depressing day of the year. Our holiday binge is but a memory; bills are coming due; the mid-point between winter and spring is weeks away; tomorrow begins another week of labour; and resolutions that *this year I will be a different, better person....* ah, resolutions (!) where did they go? Add up the damage—and what spews out is a sure fire formula for what could be a very depressing day ahead.

So—again, this year, you’ve been warned!—tomorrow is Blue Monday: pull out a good book; give a friend or relative a call or write them a kind letter; sit down in company with companions, colleagues, and family to some good food, music and drink and hold on tight to each other. Let’s banish misfortune as best we can today and tomorrow, and bask in the glow of friendship, art, fine cooking, and love that—truly—we can kindle if we just try!....

Each Blue Sunday, I’ve talked about the blues—that music of melancholy longing, pent up rage, hard living, loving and extraordinary resilience etched in a handful of notes and three line stanzas, in 4/4 time. Last year, I undertook a survey of traditional blues lyrics and discovered that these songs can be grouped in four basic themes:

- The blues we feel about things others have done to us
- Blues that arise from the things that those we love are doing to themselves
- Blues provoked by feelings that something is fundamentally flawed, ingrained and amiss in the world
- And the fourth, and very common theme of the blues, is the harm or bad things we do to others, and the feelings of guilt that arise as a consequence.

From Blind Lemon Jefferson, to Robert Johnson, from Koko Taylor to Howling Wolf to Robert Cray, over and over again these four themes well-up in blues lyric—haunting singer, musician, and audiences alike.

Last year, I zeroed in on the fourth theme of the blues—raw, chronic aching guilt: the fact of having committed a wrong, the intense feeling of being culpable, of being responsible, for having perpetrated some kind of specific or implied offense to others, especially those near and dear to us, and of having to deal with the consequences that follow: “Not a day goes by,” Robert Cray laments in the blues song “Consequences,” “that a man doesn’t have to choose/’tween what he wants/What he’s afraid to lose...I was smokin’ and drinkin’/and thinkin’ when you walked by...And all I’ve done since then/Is lie, lie lie!/. . .Homes will crumble and hearts will break.../I took my chances/Had a real good time/But I’d give my soul/For a little peace of mind.”

Question. What if, instead of wishful thinking for impossibilities—how, in fact, would a person give his soul for peace of mind?—instead, what if we were to feel what the philosopher Marcia Cavell called: *the right kind of guilt*—the mature nuts and bolts kind, the kind of grown up, gnawing feelings of guilt that gives rise to what Donald Carveth of York University in Toronto calls the “*capacity for concern; concern that drives toward reparation.*” I want to repeat that: Carveth defines guilt as “the capacity for concern; concern that drives toward reparation.”

(These quotes are from: “What is Guilt,” a roundtable discussion, The Philoctetes Institute, February 22, 2007)

Think about it: it looks like Robert Cray’s blues lament is more about *shame* really, rather than *guilt*—I feel ashamed for what I’ve done; I’m a bad person; and O Lord, I’d give my soul....This is painful self-punishment, self-torment; which is to say, it’s *still* about *me*: my ego, making *me* the centre of the tragedy; not the *other* person, not the loved one I have betrayed, wronged, and hurt, or the relationship I’ve trashed and imperiled. And the way out of this,

Donald Carveth argues, is through “a greater capacity to feel guilt,” the kind that leads to “creative, constructive, reparative activity.”

With this statement—do you feel it?—we’re crossing a boundary from a *feeling* that we normally think of when we hear the word “guilt,” to an *action*, an affective deed, or condition, called “forgiveness,” one stage or step of which is repair and restitution—the effort to restore to good condition after damage, to set right or make amends as a consequence of loss, wrong, and error.

Let’s return again to the blues and what was, for me, something unexpected. Most times, when I think of the blues what comes to mind is jilted lovers, juke joints, and bad times—of hurt, nagging worries, and guilt. But returning to blues lyrics, I have found another theme, a fifth one to add to our list; and it’s songs of the individual and communal healing power of survival and forgiveness.

“It’s a hard old world that we’ve got to live in,” sings Jim Ritchey
“The next step is mine
Everybody in it needs a lot of forgiving
The next step is mine
The journey’s long and the trial’s demanding...
Put one foot in front of the other
Love my neighbor and my brother
Move it all along just a little bit further
The next step is mine.” And this:

“I just keep walkin’ one step at a time,” Andra Faye sings,
“Walkin’ baby, ‘cause it eases my mind
To know I’m walkin, walkin’ home to you.
If I ain’t got no car, can’t catch no bus,
I’ll start walkin’...
I’ll keep walkin’, if that’s what it takes
I’m walkin’, though we both make mistakes...”

Andra Faye’s “Walkin’ Home to You” points to essential moments in the dynamic of scenarios of forgiveness: “I’m walkin’, though we *both* make mistakes”—the roots of the living tree of

forgiveness sink deep in the soil of mutual failure, weakness and ignorance. And then there's the hard won insight that forgiveness can only occur through contrition, acknowledging failure: "though we both make mistakes," Andra Faye sings; and *then* comes the work of reparation—by reaching out, walkin' toward the person we've wronged and by whom we've been wronged in order to repair, rebuild. "Nothing we do," the great 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "however, virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness."

Now we have all just navigated through a season traditionally devoted to good will and the renewal of hope: Hanukkah, Yule, Solstice, Christmas, New Year's. And yet, here's Blue Monday rising. Major tragedies, and heart wrenching intimate ones known only to ourselves, injuries done to others and us just keep happening; and no matter what, we face the challenge of trying to overcome the deep hurt, the toxic anger, divisiveness, guilt and the addictive cycle of revenge or the dead end of despair. "You've got your turf staked out," Phil Wiggins laments in the song "Cool Down," "and you want no shadow of doubt/so you're trying to take all the doubters out/Cool down [brother and sister]; cool down... You better let your blood cool down." And listen to Achilles, the ancient Greek warrior as recorded in Homer's *Illiad*: "Why, I wish that strife would vanish away from the among gods and mortals/and gall, which makes a man grow angry for all his great mind,/ that gall of anger that swarms like smoke inside of a man's heart..." But how? Even if we cool down, and dispel the smoking gall of anger.....? "Keep walkin'," Andra Faye sings, even if you "ain't got no car; can't catch no bus/I'll start walkin'." An answer to this despair, this anger and hurt, lies on the path of forgiveness.

Is that easily said? It may sound like a banal cliché: The answer to the injury that arises from the wrongs done to us by others is forgiveness. “Why that’s common sense,” one young woman said to my son recently when she read through our Seven Principles. Prescribing forgiveness may just be one more recipe from the book of Common Sense, and answering the question: “what is forgiveness?” may seem perfectly straightforward as well. “To forgive is to stop hating the person or persons who have injured you;” that’s how Boston University philosopher Charles Griswold defines forgiveness. (see Charles L. Griswold, “Forgiveness and Apology: What, When, Why,” in *Tikkun*, March/April 2008; and “On Forgiveness,” in the Opinionator column, *New York Times*, December 26, 2010. Hereafter: G/T and G/NYT.)

But then, like any good, pesky philosopher, Griswold starts making distinctions and asking more questions. “Some claim that forgiveness is...ridding oneself of vengeful anger” and of hatred of “the person or persons who’ve injured you. Do that and you have forgiven. But if you were able to banish anger from your soul simply by taking a pill,” or if you had “brain surgery that deleted part of your memory” so that you forgot the offense altogether, “would the result really be forgiveness?” (G/T and G/NYT) Doesn’t feel like it, does it? If that’s the case, it seems that forgiving is *not* forgetting; forgiveness *requires* remembrance. To forgive is *not* to forget. As well, even if you *stop* hating, though you remember the evil done to you, but you *still* take revenge, though that kind of cold-bloodedness is hard for me to imagine, that doesn’t *look* like forgiveness either, does it? All right—so what do we have? Stop hating, but remember(!), and no taking revenge: here are three criteria, or characteristics of forgiveness.

But what about the appropriate timing of forgiveness? “Some say,” and this would include, I think, those like Donald Carveth of York University, “that it should wait for the offender to take responsibility;” others—especially in the Christian tradition—believe “that the victim should first overcome anger altogether” and that “forgiveness should be unilaterally

bestowed at the earliest possible moment.” (G/NYT) Recent psychological research has indicated that forgiveness “can be effective in reducing hurt and stress” and that this has “important implications for the prevention and treatment of cardiovascular and other chronic diseases.”

From this perspective, timing and blaming are no brainers—get on with it: forgive, and it will improve the overall quality of your life. (see Stanford Forgiveness Project, www.hawaiiforgivenessproject.org/Stanford.htm)

Forgive so that you can live without toxic anger and get on with your life.

But what if you have every good reason to be angry, hurt, and that you are totally justified in expecting/demanding reparation and restitution for the harm that has been done to you? In fact, are some things unforgiveable? Is forgiveness then really commendable? Swift, unilateral forgiveness, in this instance, could be seen and felt as letting the offender go scot free; it papers over legitimate demands of vengeful anger and repair for grievous wrongs done.

Consider the effects of lasting harm done to an innocent person who was abused, in the song “Nightmare” by Gaye Adegbalola of the blues/soul group Sapphire:

I have the same old nightmare
Makes me scream and cry
You come to me all in my dreams
I'll be haunted 'til the day I die...

I had a follow-up conversation with Donald Carveth, the Toronto based academic, who said that the right kind of guilt is the “capacity for concern; concern that drives toward reparation.” I asked him: if there is a right kind of guilt, what does real forgiveness look like? And this is some of what he wrote to me: “Moving from mature guilt to reparation to forgiveness?—I think the essential thing is that guilt be genuine, that there be genuine contrition, and that it leads to reparative action—only then can forgiveness be accepted and real;” this is the kind of forgiveness that can “transform our inner being....I guess I believe that forgiveness has to be earned in this sense. I know that in the Christian tradition we often associate God’s

forgiveness with grace as understood as a free gift, but I think this gift may be given only to those who experience genuine contrition, not those who evade it through self-torment.” Carveth writes further: “I also think people need to be more thoughtful about their acts of forgiveness: we shouldn’t cheapen it by offering it to those who don’t deserve it and can’t really make use of it. We need to look for signs of genuine contrition. If they are there, we should do our best to forgive.” (personal communication between Epperson and Carveth, September 6, 2010)

“Forgiveness is neither just a therapeutic technique nor simply self-regarding in its motivation,” Charles Griswold writes, “it is fundamentally a moral relation between self and other.” At best, an exemplary case of interpersonal forgiveness would look like this: the person who has wronged you offers solid reasons for setting aside your legitimate resentment and need for revenge by taking a series of steps that include admission of responsibility, contrition, a resolve to mend his ways, and a recognition of what the wrong he has done felt like from your point of view. Often, we never get anywhere near that close, and are left to struggle with our nightmares. But if it happened, it is likely we would accept—accept it so that we can live without the toxicity of lingering, gnawing anger; and so that we can more nearly achieve a principal reason for forgiveness—“namely, the restoration of mutual respect and reaffirmation that one is not to be treated wrongly.” (G/NYT)

Why forgive? What makes it commendable thing to do at the appropriate time? When the necessary conditions are met, “forgiveness is what a good person would seek because it expresses fundamental moral ideals” that we deeply value—“spiritual growth and renewal; truth-telling; mutual respectful address; responsibility and respect; reconciliation and peace.” (G/NYT)

I want to bring these remarks to close with two works of art that get at the soul of forgiveness. The first is a remarkable stop-action, animated movie called “Mary and Max,”

made in 2009 by the brilliant Australian director Adam Elliott. Mary is a forlorn Australian girl who strikes up a chance, and very unusual, correspondence with Max—an obese New York City recluse with an acute case of Asperger Syndrome. Over the years, they exchange letters, offering creative solutions to each other’s problems, and contemplate the confusion of everyday life. Mary resolves to help Max, becomes a brilliant student in the field of mental disorders, and publishes path-breaking research based on Max’s case. Max is outraged, feels exploited and betrayed by his one and only friend, writes an angry letter to Mary and breaks off their correspondence. Mary, for her part, lacerated with guilt, writes to Max asking for forgiveness, pulps the book before it can be sold, and spirals into a depression. When things couldn’t get bleaker, Mary receives a priceless gift from Max, with a letter in which he tells her the life-affirming, life-saving words that he has forgiven her, because he came to this realization: “you are not perfect, and I am not perfect.”

Second work of art and forgiveness: it’s from the closing scene of *The Marriage of Figaro* by Mozart. It’s the twilight of the 18th century; a heartless Count demands the sexual favours of a young, soon-to-be-bride. An elaborate plot, devised by his servants and unloved wife, is set into motion to reveal the depths of his evil intent, to shame him, and to safeguard the virtue of the young woman. To make a long story short: the plan succeeds. The Count sinks to his knees before his wife and speaks the first tender, sincere words he has offered her in years: “Countess, forgive me”; and she, with compassion, and to unimaginably peaceful, exquisite music, replies: “Piu docile io sono; e dico di si—I am gentler, and I grant it to you.” Music of true forgiveness fills the nighttime garden setting, conferring on all who hears it sweet forgiveness.

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