

Stand There and Take It?

Luke 6:27-38 and Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40

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- Samereh Alinejad is an Iranian mother who has experienced quite a bit of heartbreak in her life.
- The mother of three had already lost one son, when he was 11, to a motorbike accident.
- Years later, in 2014, Alinejad lost her son, Abdollah Hosseinzadeh, at the age of 18, after being stabbed during an argument.
- Abdollah's killer was also his friend, Balal. The two knew each other and played soccer together.
- Alinejad, was so grief stricken at the loss of a second son, especially to violence, that she was determined to make sure that her son's killer would pay.
- In Iran, the death penalty is used in cases like this.
- More specifically, the guilty are hanged - in the public square.
- And the heirs of the victim are the ones that are able to pay retribution to the condemned by actually kicking out the chair under the blindfolded person's feet so that the execution can take place.
- Alinejad was prepared to do so - and made her way to Balal as he stood, pleading for his life and begging for mercy.
- That's when Alinejad did something no one expected: she stood up in front of Balal, slapped him across the face in rage, and then removed the noose from Balal's neck, pardoning him with her actions. As of the article's publication, Balal is now in jail, since the victim's family can only spare the killer's life, not remove a jail sentence - that is up to the courts.
- According to the news source *The Guardian*, it was a very powerful scene for all who were there.
- Alinejad spoke to *The Guardian* about her actions, and said, "After [I slapped him], I felt as if rage vanished within my heart. I felt as if the blood in my veins began to flow again," she said. "I burst into tears and I called my husband and asked him to come up and remove the noose."¹
- This is one of many scenes I came across while looking for "real world" examples about forgiveness in light of this week's scripture lessons.

¹ [Iranian mother who spared her son's killer: 'Vengeance has left my heart' | Iran | The Guardian](#)

- In this week's reading from the gospel of Luke, we enter into the middle of Jesus's "sermon on the plain", where we are instructed to behave in a way that is quite countercultural.
- *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you."*²
- That may sound different from the way that I read it a few moments ago, because it is.
- The New Revised Standard Version of the first four verses of this morning's gospel passage roll off the tongue differently - and may seem like instructions from Jesus to take a passive role as a response to those who may do harm to you.
- But it's not the case.
- Dr. Susan E. Hylen, New Testament professor at Candler School of Theology, notes that an important piece to pay attention to is the first few words of verse 27, when Jesus says, "but I say to you that listen".
- Dr. Hylen notes that by being listeners of what Jesus has to say means that they are those who hear and believe in God.
- Being children of God - those that are listening, Dr. Hylen notes that it *"transforms the disciple's actions from compliance to resistance in the face of evil. First, Jesus gives the listeners new lenses through which to view their situations. Even though they are hated and insulted (in the previous portion of Jesus's sermon on the plain), from Jesus' perspective the disciple is the one who is 'blessed'. The reversal of the blessings and woes puts the listener in a position of power - not a worldly power, to be sure, but one that shares in the power of the kingdom of God."*³
- So, okay, here we are, as listeners of what Jesus is trying to say...but how does that translate?
- How, in today's society of oversensitivity to "individual rights that seem to be greater than the sake of the whole" move from the instinct to cry foul as it (supposedly) impinges on those rights to, instead, responding with grace and kindness?

² Luke 6:27-31

³ Feasting on the word, theological perspective, Susan E. Hylen, Luke 6:27-38

- How do we, as Eugene Peterson's interpretation of this morning's gospel lesson tells us, to just "stand there and take it"?
- How do we turn the other cheek?
- Great. Question.
- I have always disliked the phrase "forgive and forget".
- Perhaps it's because it's next to impossible to do.
- If we're being honest, show of hands for anyone who has, actually, truly, "forgiven and forgotten".
- (Spoiler: if you had truly forgotten, you wouldn't be raising your hand...)
- Forgive and forget is something that, I think we can all agree, has some true misgivings.
- And perhaps, it's because of a passage like this gospel lesson.
- Pastor and preaching professor, Charles Bugg, notes that the golden rule, which closes this morning's gospel passage, writes that *"despite the fact that others advocate treating others as we want to be treated, the Gospel of Luke calls for a radical new interpretation of this rule. Jesus talks about loving our enemies and doing good to those who hate us, curse us, or even strike us on the cheek. In other words, our response to others is not predicated on their behavior. Our response, in fact, is diametrically opposed to the way others treat us. Jesus' response,"* Bugg writes, *"is to do good to those who do bad to us."*⁴
- So is that really the "forgive and forget" that can, so commonly, roll off the tongue?
- Or is it more about "forgive and don't let it happen again"?
- Or "forgive and learn from it"?
- Bugg continues, *"the admonition of Luke to love even our enemies is not just a good idea where we try our best to make it happen. It is not a call to grit our teeth and make a resolution to be nicer even to those who are not nice to us. Rather, the call of Luke is to live in a way contrary to our human nature, a way that is possible only as we 'live out' of a new power born from above."*⁵
- So, as the psalmist for this morning writes, we should *"trust the Lord, and do good"*?⁶

⁴ Feasting on the word, pastoral perspective, Charles Bugg, Luke 6:27-38

⁵ ibid

⁶ Psalm 37:3

- The psalm for this morning and the gospel marry well together - the psalmist indicates that we should “*commit your way to the Lord*”⁷ - remember: we were told in Luke for “*you who listen*”.⁸
- The psalmist: “*Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.*”⁹
- Luke: “*do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*”¹⁰
- You know, the Revised Common Lectionary does what it can to pull things together like this, but it doesn’t always hit the mark and make it “so easy” for us preachers - tying it all together into a pretty little package...
- This morning, however, the attempted connection seems to get it right.
- Author Debie Thomas comments that “*no matter what we think of it, our call as Christians is to walk in love. To practice mercy. To refuse revenge, recrimination, and rage. To give our offenders second, third, fourth, and even hundredth chances.*”¹¹
- She, too, drives the point home.
- Names something that, if I’m being honest, I don’t always want to abide by.
- Sometimes I want someone who has wronged me to get their “just desserts”.
- And that’s when I also admit that I’m failing at being a Christ follower.
- And get myself in check.
- And so, whether it’s about “forgive and forget” or “forgive and whatever it is that makes you not kick away the chair of your son’s killer”, we should be mindful of how God is calling us to an even better way.
- However, it’s not easy.
- So, Thomas notes that there are three things that forgiveness is **not**.
- I will allow her to conclude my sermon with words that drive the point home better than any I may attempt.
- And so, I offer Thomas’s words of what forgiveness is not:
- “*First, forgiveness is not denial. Forgiveness isn’t pretending that an offense doesn’t matter, or that a wound doesn’t hurt. Forgiveness isn’t acting as if things don’t have to change. Forgiveness isn’t allowing ourselves to be abused and mistreated, or assuming that God has no interest in justice. Forgiveness isn’t synonymous with healing or reconciliation. Healing has its own timetable, and sometimes reconciliation isn’t possible. In fact, sometimes our lives depend on*

⁷ Psalm 37:5

⁸ Luke 6:27

⁹ Psalm 37:8

¹⁰ Luke 6:27-28

¹¹ [Journey with Jesus - Current Essay](#)

*us severing ties with our offenders, even if we've forgiven them. In other words, forgiveness is not cheap.*¹²

- *“Secondly, forgiveness isn’t a detour or a shortcut. Yes, Christianity insists on forgiveness. But it calls us first to mourn, to lament, to burn with zeal, and to hunger and thirst for justice. Forgiveness in the Christian tradition isn’t a palliative; it works hand-in-hand with the arduous work of repentance and transformation. In other words, there is nothing godly about responding to systemic evil with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity.”*¹³
- *“Thirdly, forgiveness is not instantaneous. Not if we’re honest. Forgiveness is a process – a messy, non-linear, and often barbed process that might leave us feeling healed and liberated one minute, and bleeding out of every pore the next. In my experience, no one who says the words, “I forgive you” gets a pass from this messy process, and no one who struggles extra hard to forgive for reasons of temperament, circumstance, or trauma should feel that they’re less godly or spiritual than those who don’t.”*¹⁴
- Thomas expounds on the ways that our faith is something that can give us great strength, despite it having us do - what may feel like - everything opposite of what human nature would want us to do.
- She continues as she writes:
- *“Okay. If forgiveness isn’t denial or a detour, if forgiveness isn’t quick – then what is it? What is Jesus asking of us when he invites us to love, bless, pray, give, lend, do good, withhold judgment, extend mercy, and turn the other cheek?”*¹⁵
- *“In her popular memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes that withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. If Lamott is correct, then I think forgiveness is choosing to foreground love instead of resentment. If I’m consumed with my own pain, if I’ve made injury my identity, if I insist on weaponizing my well-deserved anger in every interaction I have with people who hurt me, then I’m drinking poison, and the poison will kill me long before it does anything to my abusers. To choose forgiveness is to release myself from the tyranny of bitterness. To give up my frenzied longing to be understood and vindicated by anyone other than God. To refuse the seductive lie that revenge will make me feel better. To cast my*

¹² ibid

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ ibid

*hunger for justice deep into God's heart, because justice belongs to God, and only God can secure it."*¹⁶

- *"I wonder if we're often squeamish about forgiveness," Thomas continues, "because we misunderstand the nature of unconditional love. Foregrounding God's all-embracing love doesn't for one second require us to relativize evil. If it did, God's love would be cruel and weak, not compassionate and strong. But where we humans make love and judgment mutually exclusive – where we cry out for revenge, retribution, and punishment – God holds out for restorative justice. A kind of justice we can barely imagine. A kind of justice that has the power to heal both the oppressed and the oppressor."*¹⁷
- To heal both the oppressed and the oppressor...

- A week after pardoning her son's killer, the Iranian mother who pardoned her son's killer told *The Guardian* that she was at peace. She stated, *"Losing a child is like losing a part of your body. All these years, I felt like a moving dead body," she said. "But now, I feel very calm, I feel I'm at peace. I feel that vengeance has left my heart."*¹⁸
- Friends, if she can do it, so can we.
- May it be so.
- Amen.

¹⁶ ibid

¹⁷ ibid

¹⁸ [Iranian mother who spared her son's killer: 'Vengeance has left my heart' | Iran | The Guardian](#)