

Abraham Lincoln knew that humor and story could influence better than humiliation and shame. He was even attacked for his leniency on his enemies. One woman told him that he should destroy his enemies. He responded, "Isn't that what I do when I make them friends?" His is the storyteller's style of influence – not seeking to win but to erase the lines that divide. When challenged to a duel, Lincoln's choice of weapons best exemplifies his attitude toward the 'duel' strategy of resolving differences. He refused the options of daggers, swords, or pistols, and asked, "How about cow dung at 5 paces?" (Annette Simmons, *THE STORY FACTOR*, p. 210)

No matter the time, no matter the organization, there will always be conflict. Let's look at today's gospel. Jesus' response to conflict was an endless drive for reconciliation. It is a moral imperative for us as His disciples – not an optional nice thing we might decide to do. He outlines a series of steps to be applied when community relationships breakdown. If we follow these steps there is a good chance that Humpty-Dumpty will be put back together again. If reconciliation does not happen after the first step, the procedures escalate.

I don't need to repeat them. But I would like to point out that the first one – a one-on-one sit-down – is the first step. This may be the single most violated of all the instructions Jesus ever gave! Why? Because we face powerful reasons to ignore these instructions. Our egos want to be proved RIGHT so we're often not interested in reconciliation. People tend to escalate almost any conflict to the highest authority they think they can access. Pastors get copies of letters that were sent to bishops without ever having any knowledge that there was a problem. Fortunately we have a Bishop who was a pastor for 10 years – and was often in the same position – so he is very understanding.

The other one I want to comment on is the last step – if all attempts at reconciliation fail, they are to be treated like tax collectors or Gentiles. We might think that this means we can just write certain people off. NOT AT ALL. Tax collectors and Gentiles are supposed to be special objects of the community's care. We need to read the New Testament. Jesus gets especially criticized for His outreach to both of those groups, that most everyone else had written off. In other words, no one becomes exempt from the love of Christ that is SUPPOSED to be manifested by the Christian community. (help from John Shea, *ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN*, p. 268-269)

Second, reconciliation is very hard work. How do we treat those who have harmed us? How do we treat our enemies? This is an ancient question, and still relevant in our world today. A little girl came home from Sunday School and asked her father if she could send a note to Osama Bin Laden. "Why him?" asked her startled father. "Because," said the little girl, "if Mr. Bin Laden got a nice note from a little American girl, maybe he'd think that we're not all bad and come out of his cave and talk to people about our differences." "Suzie," said the proud father, "that's a wonderful idea." "Yes," said Suzie, "and once he's out of the cave, the Marines can blast him to smithereens." (Author not specified, *DEALING WITH YOUR ENEMIES*, p. 51)

We often speak of burying the hatchet, but most of the time we simply bury it in a shallow, well-marked grave! Reconciliation is a challenging idea for all of us. But as disciples of Christ, it seems that a lot of us think of forgiveness as a giant eraser on the blackboard of life. But there is biblical precedent for the lasting effects of sins that have been forgiven. God forgave David for his murder of Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, with whom David had committed adultery. But their firstborn child from their adulterous union still died.

Jesus came to forgive the sins of the whole world, but according to His parable in Matthew 25, he will come again to separate the sheep from the goats. It is a complicated and challenging mystery.

Forgiveness is a starting place, not a stopping place. It is God's gift to those who wish to begin again, but where we go with it is up to us. Most of us prefer remorse to repentance. We would rather feel badly about the damage we have done than get estimates on the cost of repair. We would rather learn to live with guilt than face the hard work of new life.

While penance has all but disappeared from our vocabulary, it was once the church's best tool for getting over that hump. Once a person had confessed their sins and received assurance of pardon, they voluntarily took on specific acts of penance, which were baby steps in the direction of new life. If the person had stolen vegetables from a neighbor's garden, then they might volunteer to weed the garden every other day for a month. If they had slandered someone, then they might revisit all the households where they had done that and set the record straight.

Penance was not punishment. Penance was repair. Penance was a way back into relationship, but like all other good spiritual practices, it was vulnerable to corruption. In some places it became routine and trivialized. And it has mostly disappeared. But the consequence of its disappearance is that we have lost this very powerful way of living into our repentance. As a result, many of us have learned to substitute words for actions. We say that we are sorry for our faults. I almost always give both prayer and action as a penance in the confessional. And sometimes people just truthfully ask, avoiding the hard work of reconciliation – "Can't I just say a rosary?" Not if we are at all serious about reconciliation. (help from SPEAKING OF SIN, THE LOST LANGUAGE OF SALVATION, Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 90-91)

Third, 2 stories of reconciliation to flesh this out. On a summer day, he said to her the words that every spouse dreads to hear: "I don't love you anymore. I'm not sure I ever did. I'm moving out. The kids will understand. They'll want me to be happy."

But she knew that he was in the grip of something else. He worked hard; he was successful and had provided a comfortable and secure life for his family. But a new endeavor hadn't been going well. His ability to be the breadwinner was in rapid decline. He was miserable and lost and tired. He was losing himself emotionally and letting himself go physically. And now he wanted out of his marriage and to be done with his family.

She said no.

He was stunned. He expected her to fall apart completely. But she would have none of it. "What can we do to give you the distance you need, without hurting the family?" she asked. "Go trekking in Nepal. Build a yurt in the back meadow. Turn the garage studio into a man-cave. Get that drum set you've always wanted. Anything but hurting the children and me with a reckless move like the one you're talking about."

He balked. He belittled the notion. He got angry. She kept her resolve: "Whatever we can do to give you the distance you need...."

Well, he didn't move out. Instead, he spent the summer being unreliable. He stopped coming home at his usual 6:00. He would stay out late and not call. He blew off the family's Fourth of July barbecue to go to someone else's party. He was on his own, disengaged from her and the kids. He didn't even wish her a "Happy Birthday."

Her most trusted friends who saw all this were appalled. “How can you stand by and accept his behavior? Kick him out! Get a lawyer!”

No, she said. Her husband was hurting, but this problem was not hers to solve. Their marriage was not the root of his problem. He was. And she was not going to let this become about their marriage and family.

Privately, she had decided that 6 months would be it.

It was a hard summer. There were good days when she was able to keep to the high road. Despite her hurt and anger, she never wavered. She created a summer of fun for the kids and invited him to come along – or not. She told the kids, “Daddy’s having a hard time as adults often do. But we’re a family, no matter what.”

Then one day, she writes, “there he was, home from work early, mowing the lawn. A man doesn’t mow his lawn if he’s going to leave it. Not this man. Then he fixed a door that had been broken for 8 years. He made a comment about our front porch needing paint. *Our* front porch. He mentioned needing wood for next winter. The future. Little by little, he started talking about the future. It was Thanksgiving dinner that sealed it. My husband bowed his head humbly and said, “I’m thankful for my family.”

“He was back.” (“Those aren’t Fighting Words, Dear” by Laura A Munson, the New York Times, August 2, 2009)

And one more. During the Second World War, Eric Lomax was tortured by the Japanese on the Burma-Siam Railway. 50 years later he met one of his tormentors. His book, *THE RAILWAY MAN*, tells the story. Now if a person is a victim of torture, they never totally recover. They may be able to cope with the physical damage, but the psychological damage stays with them forever.

In 1945, Eric Lomax returned to Edinburgh to a life of uncertainty, following three and a half years of fear, interrogation and torture as a POW in the Far East. Eric Lomax had no self-worth, no trust in people, and ended up living in a world of his own. People thought that Eric Lomax was coping, but inside he was falling apart. He became impossible to live with; it was as if the sins his captors had sown in him were being harvested by his family. Eric Lomax had intense hatred for the Japanese, and was always looking for ways to demean them. In his mind he often thought of his hateful interrogator. He fantasized about drowning him, caging him and beating him – as he had done to Eric.

After Eric Lomax’s retirement in 1982, he started searching for information about what had happened in Siam. In the course of his search he learned that Nagase Takashi, his interrogator and torturer, had offered to help others with information. Eric’s torturer was still alive, and now doing charitable works. Eric was very skeptical.

A turning point came in 1987 when he came across THE MEDICAL FOUNDATION FOR VICTIMS OF TORTURE. For the first time he was able to unload the hate that had become his prison. Seeing the change in him, his wife wrote to Nagase. The letter Nagase wrote back was full of compassion, and Eric at that moment lost the hard shell that had been wrapped around him. He began to think the unthinkable.

They met in 1998 in Kanburi, Thailand. When they met, Nagase greeted Eric with a formal bow. Eric took his hand and said in Japanese, “Good morning, Mr. Nagase, how are you.” Mr. Nagase was trembling and crying, and he said over and over again: “I am so sorry, so very sorry.” Eric had come with no sympathy for this man, and yet Nagase, through his complete humility, turned this around.

After their meeting, Eric felt he'd come to some kind of peace and resolution. Forgiveness is possible when someone is ready to accept forgiveness. Some time the hating has to stop. (adapted from LECTONAID, Sept-Nov 2008, p. 40)

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