

Matthew | Saint Dolly & the art of forgiveness

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Alison Sampson ~ Matthew 18:21-25

Just a couple of weeks ago, Dolly Parton died, and the world is in mourning. One little story helps illustrate why. Her singing career kicked off in 1967, when she was invited onto The Porter Wagoner Show. Porter was the star, Dolly was the sidekick, and when she sang solos she was booed. So Porter asked her to sing duets with him, instead, because people wouldn't boo while he was singing. As they sang together, Dolly gained in confidence and stage presence and began writing songs; gradually, she became the star.

Porter did not respond well to this shift. They had a professional falling out and Dolly left the show. Porter then sued her for millions, arguing that since he had invested in her at the beginning, he was entitled to a percentage of her ongoing success. Rather than endure an expensive and damaging court battle, Dolly settled out of court; she spent years paying him off. It is out of this painful experience that she wrote her hit song, 'I will always love you.' 'Bittersweet memories, that is all I'm taking with me,' she sang, not about a romantic relationship but a professional one.

Fast forward a number of years and Porter was in financial trouble himself, about to be bankrupted. So he made the hard decision to sell the publishing rights to his music catalogue and, with it, the right to future earnings from his music. Was Dolly delighted that he'd finally received his comeuppance? Did she gloat? No, not at all. Instead she anonymously bought the rights then gifted them back to him—and why? So he could continue to benefit from his work and his children would have something to inherit.

She could have treated him like an enemy. Instead, she remembered his early kindness and sang that she wished him love, joy and his heart's desire. Then she gave him these gifts herself.

'How many times must I forgive?' asks Peter. 'Seven times?' 'Nah,' says Jesus. 'Buy out the business and gift it back to your enemy. But if you don't, then you'll be handed over to be tortured.'

I'm sorry, what??? But it's true: Jesus tells Peter a story about a slave who is forgiven an unimaginable debt but who fails to extend forgiveness himself. Then he says that the slave will be handed over to be tortured until the debt can be repaid. Says Jesus, 'So my heavenly Father will also do to every one

of you, if you do not forgive your sibling from your heart.’ (Matt. 18:35). It seems like God is a fickle sadist who in one moment forgives, but who in the next responds to our failures by whisking forgiveness away and sending us away to great suffering.

Of course, many people are quite comfortable with these and other images of a vicious God. The mighty warrior fighting for righteousness’ sake. The vindictive ruler, the angry judge, the flaming sword, and all the rest. Such people seem confident that they are on the right side of God, and that God’s righteous anger will protect them. But for those of us who are more aware of our own capacity for sin, perhaps, or who have borne the brunt of other people’s righteous condemnation, this image of God is horrific. This isn’t a god we can love and trust, but a god of fear and loathing; a god whose followers all too often take it upon themselves to withhold mercy and even visit divine punishment upon others.

But perhaps there is another way to read this. As noted, Jesus says we need to forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times. Right away, this is interesting. Way back in Genesis, we are told that ‘whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.’ (Gen. 4:15). Seven generations later, Cain’s descendent Lamech kills a young man who wounds him, and claims his own vengeance to be seventy-seven times (Gen. 4:23-24). Jesus’ audience, who know scripture by heart, hear the echoes and are reminded of these stories of retaliation and vengeance. But Jesus is flipping the script, from retribution to mercy. Rather than engage in spiralling acts of violence, he demands his followers enact forgiveness over and over again, so many times that they lose count and forgiveness becomes their way of life.

Having insisted on this abundant mercy, he goes on to tell the story about torture. That is, someone who has experienced great forgiveness and yet fails to extend it to others will be handed over to be tortured; so, too, will it be with us if we fail to forgive. How is this possible? First, Jesus tells us that we need to offer forgiveness over and over again; then he tells a story in which, if we fail to forgive, we won’t be forgiven at all! Surely this is contradictory!

The clue lies in the wording. Jesus’ story doesn’t actually say that God takes forgiveness away. Nor does it say that God is the torturer turning the thumbscrews and cracking the whip. It only says that God will ‘hand us over’ to the jailers. It’s the same language used for Jesus’ crucifixion, when he is handed over into human hands and experiences great suffering and death.

God has created a world of infinite forgiveness, but we don't have to live in that world. We choose it. If we turn our back on it, we don't experience divine punishment. Instead, we experience the natural consequences of a life without mercy, a life of spiralling pain.

You've probably heard it said that refusing to forgive is like drinking poison, then waiting for the other person to die. Martin Luther King Jr, who had very many enemies and well knew what he was talking about, put it this way: 'Hate ... is a cancer that gnaws away at the very vital centre of your life and your existence ... Jesus says love, because hate destroys the hater as well as the hated.' End quote.

Indeed, hatred destroys us. It allows the wounds that others have inflicted to fester in us, shaping and defining our lives. God calls us into fullness of life, a life shaped by freedom and joy and flourishing. But if we bind and define ourselves by our pain, we will never be truly free. Instead, we will become trapped in our bitterness, lurching in painful lockstep with our enemies all the way to hell.

At a very basic level, I suggest this is what is happening in the modern state of Israel. Unable to reckon with the unimaginable pain of the Holocaust, key players built a modern state grounded in victimhood and determined to retaliate against each and every harm. Naturally, Palestinians resisted invasion and settler violence, some by any means possible. October 6 was only one of many acts of both violent and nonviolent resistance. That particular episode was brutal, but so is the suffering inflicted on Palestinians both before and ever since. Hamas and the Israeli government have become mirror images of each other, each dehumanised and dehumanising, each seeking endless vengeance and experiencing infinite pain. As one rabbi said about the horror, Why did we resist Rome two thousand years ago if all we've done is become it? We could have simply capitulated then and saved ourselves all the trouble.

Of course, I am not living with those particular histories or pain. I don't know how forgiveness plays out at that level, but I do know it changes the script. I also know that it must be regularly practiced by followers of Jesus, including here and now.

So what is forgiveness? First, what it's not. Forgiveness is not cheap. It's not about accepting abuse or allowing our boundaries to be trampled or putting ourselves in ongoing danger. Nor is it the same as reconciliation;

that's a whole 'nother process. Forgiveness is not denial, it's not about glossing over things or pretending they never happened, nor is it easy or quick. It cannot be compelled, and it doesn't mean that there are no consequences for harmful action.

Instead, forgiveness is simply a way of positioning ourselves and declaring ourselves to be free. It's a way of insisting on the humanity of the other, even when they deny our own humanity. It's a way of refusing to be defined by the evil that we suffer, and it's a refusal to mirror it back. Lamech received a wound and killed the man, thus intensifying the violence and ensuring escalating payback for generations to come. But when Dolly received a wound, she didn't become like her enemy. Instead she wished him well, then she showered him and his family with grace. Indeed, followers of Jesus are called to reset the narrative.

Our work is to put an end to the cycles of harm, and we do this by refusing to retaliate. We can establish boundaries, we can engage in nonviolent resistance, we can remove ourselves from danger: but we don't lash back. Things stop with us. Through forgiveness, we enact our freedom as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and we create spaces for something new and healing, something life-giving, something good. So forgiveness takes us to heaven, while resentment throws us into hell; and where we end up is not a punishment from God, but a consequence of our own choices.

This is the glorious freedom that Dolly exhibited to the world. Freedom to be larger than life, freedom to be generous. Freedom to leave her enemy and take no vengeance, only bittersweet memories; freedom to continue to love him and wish him well. Dolly chose to live in a way where even those who hurt her were showered with generosity and transformed by love; indeed, along with his wife and children, she was at Porter Wagoner's deathbed. Her bighearted approach to people never diminished her, but led to great flourishing and joy. She loved and was loved by so many, from every walk of life, every race and culture, every gender and sexuality, at each end of the political spectrum: and so the world weeps at her death.

Earlier in Matthew's account, Jesus says: 'Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.' (Matt. 5:44). As we love, pray for and forgive those who hurt us, may we do so with Dolly's wisdom and grace. And, 'may we [like Dolly] never be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' (Rom. 12:21). God's will be done, God's love be shown. Amen. Ω