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Merit or grace?

by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez

Many of us have come away reeling from the message of last Sunday's sacred texts. Forgiveness without limit and forgiveness from the heart are two of Christianity's most staggering challenges; nevertheless, to refuse these challenges or to try to skirt or ignore them would make our claim to belong to God ring false. If we have come to this week's sacred texts looking for some respite, we will not find it because Deutero-Isaiah and the Matthean Jesus will continue to call us to be more authentic reflections of the God whose ways and thoughts are so unlike our own. God's ways and thoughts are such that even a scoundrel and the wicked can turn to God and find mercy and generous forgiveness. Think of the scoundrels you know; consider the wicked who have perpetrated dastardly crimes -- even these, insists Deutero-Isaiah, are not without hope. Even these are forgivable in the eyes of the God who made them and desires their well-being and redemption. We, for our part, with our small ways and narrow thoughts, might consider certain sinners as unredeemable and deserving of no forgiveness. Long-standing dictators who torture and murder their own people, savage militia who rape and abuse women and children, serial killers, pedophiles, terrorists who are determined to wipe out those they regard as the enemy -- what does God think of these? With a mercy and a goodness that many of us may find illogical, exasperating and even unjust, God simply says: Seek me. Turn to me and be forgiven.

But surely, we argue, how can there be forgiveness for the career criminal who finds religion at the 11th hour and repents? How can his/her countless sins be swept away? Surely God's ways are not just or fair. Perhaps the reason for our consternation in such matters is because we continue to think of merit rather than grace. Like the laborers in the vineyard who had worked twenty-five hours in the vineyard, we grow in faith and to translate our relationship with God into the love and service of others may think that we have somehow earned God's forgiveness and our redemption. For that reason, we may resent those who seem to have come late to God and even later to the vineyard and yet have been treated as generously as we. God's goodness to those 11th hour believers may lead us to reason that we deserve more since we've been hard at the work of discipleship from the beginning. But neither those who have worked from

dawn nor those that join the ranks near dusk are deserving of God's gifts. No one merits forgiveness, mercy or salvation. These are God's gracious gifts to bestow, not because we are good but because God is God.

To push our argument even further, we may reason that forgiveness is contingent upon repentance. Surely those infamous men and women who died unrepentant of their unspeakable deeds are not forgiven and will not be saved. This notion not only fails to grasp the generosity of God, it also presumes a prerogative of judgment that is God's alone. Whenever I find myself wandering down this path that presumes to know the deserved fate of another, I recall the quote from British historian William Camden: "Betwixt the stirrups and the ground, I mercy sought; I mercy found" (Remains of a Greater Worke Concerning Britaine, Sam Waterston, 1605). Just as we cannot know fully the mind and heart and ways of God, nor can we ever know all there is to know about another human being. Even in that fleeting moment between a rider's fall from a horse (betwixt the stirrup and the ground) and the point at which he/she makes lethal contact with the ground, there is time for God's forgiving mercy to transform a life and change a future. For it is by grace and not merit that sinners are saved. We, for our part, are to let God be God and to marvel at the ways and thoughts of God that we have yet to understand. Rather than resent the redemption of the wicked, we are to rejoice over their return to God. Then, for all our lives and with all our strength and effort, we are to work at closing the gap between God's thoughts and our own, between God's ways and our own by surrendering ourselves, our anger, our resentments and our desire for vengeance to the transformative power of grace.

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