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A history of loving forgiveness

by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez

During this holy season of sincere penitence, our focus often falls on sin, and rightly so. Sin separates us from God and one another. Were it not for sin, there would be no sadness, no struggle, no suffering to detract from the blessedness of being with God.

Sin is described in the Hebrew scriptures as "missing the mark," "moral blunder," "rebellion," "evil intent and actions." In the Christian sacred texts, sin is described as a "debt," as "turning away from God."

Editor Johannes Bauer has suggested that if all the scriptural doctrines on sin were summarized, sin might be described as "a slap in the face of the God who loves us" (Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology, Sheed and Ward, 1976). To think of sin in this way makes it less about breached laws or debts or rebellion, and more about a broken bond of love.



It is this aspect of sin the sacred texts invite us to dwell upon today: the love of a God who is so patient and willing to forgive recalcitrant sinners. So loving is our God that when, through sin, we slap God in the face, God turns the other cheek and forgives again and again and again.

In today's first reading, the chronicler offers a brief survey of Judah's history. Despite the countless overtures of God, this history was punctuated by sin. Like his contemporaries, the ancient writer was convinced that sin was the source of every political pitfall, of the siege of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile. But God's love was far-reaching. As the chronicler explains, Cyrus was inspired to free the exiles after conquering Babylonia; he also arranged for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

In the second reading, the Ephesians author has also elaborated on the love of God that brings sinners back from the dead. Although the ancient writer does not name the sins of his contemporaries, except for calling them "transgressions," it is reasonable to assume that their sins are like our own.

When he was asked his opinion on the sins of humankind, Mohandas Gandhi insisted that all sin is social. Not long before his assassination, Gandhi wrote what he called the "seven blunders of humanity" on a paper and gave it to his grandson Arun. According to Arun, the seven blunders were "wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, and politics without principles." Later, Arun added an eighth blunder: "rights without responsibility."

Still later, Steven Gilbert, director of technology at the Labyrinth-Forum at the Maricopa Community Colleges in Tempe, Ariz., added four more human blunders to this list: "technology without direction, connection without community, teaching without joy, and learning without hope."

Despite these and whatever other blunders we may add to Gandhi's original seven, God loves humankind and graces us with the immeasurable riches of salvation. For this reason, blundering sinners need never fear to approach God for forgiveness. In the forgiveness we experience from God, we learn the love that enables us also to forgive one another. Forgiveness calls forth forgiveness, just as love calls forth love.

Perhaps the most eloquent affirmation of God's love in all of scripture is enunciated in today's Gospel: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. The good Son Jesus agreed to be lifted up to death on the cross and to the glory of eternal life. This same Jesus calls us to set aside the blunders of sin and live in the light of truth.

This is the daily challenge of every believer -- not just during Lent but throughout all of life. This was the same challenge Jesus extended to Nicodemus when he sought him out in the dark of night. However, as Raymond E. Brown has pointed out, during Jesus' public ministry Nicodemus remained a scared admirer who did not have the courage to confess Jesus publicly (A Retreat with John the Evangelist, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1998). Only after Jesus died did Nicodemus come out of the darkness into the light to help with Jesus' burial. In this, Nicodemus offers hope to those of us who are hesitant about approaching God for forgiveness. It is never too late.

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