



Diocesan Blog Posting

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WHY FORGIVE?

It is a great joy for me to join your rector and my friend, Peggy, at the altar of this church today, and to be back in a church I have known for many years. I have also had the opportunity to sit with the candidates for the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, and they are a committed, faithful group. I must say that as bishop, these sacramental rites of Christian initiation are the heartbeat of my ministry. Each Sunday I am in at least one, and sometimes more, of the two hundred churches in the Diocese of New York, and always it is my great pleasure, and profound privilege, to help shepherd men and women, boys and girls, and babies, into this next chapter of their life in God. It is intimate, powerful, moving, and profound. Every time. One of the things that I customarily tell candidates for these sacramental rites is that I believe that the vows made at Baptism, and renewed and reaffirmed in Confirmation, are among the most important words we will ever speak.

I believe that, because it is my conviction that in a world broken and torn by war and violence and division, in which some peoples rise up higher by pushing down others, in which the fabric of our common humanity is rent apart and we live as a house divided against itself — whether we are talking about Armenia and Auschwitz, or Iraq and Afghanistan and ISIS, or Ferguson and Staten Island and Baltimore, and now Charleston, or the damaged or destructive relationships in our own lives and the cruel and demeaning things people do to one another day by day — in the face of such inhumanity, it is the obligation of every person living, religious or not, Christian or other, to stand before their community, their world and whatever or whoever they believe in and declare the principles on which they will build their life. To declare what matters to them, and to make their vows that they will not be part of the forces and powers that divide and tear down and lay waste, but will be part of that which repairs the breach, lifts up that which has been laid low, brings together that which has been torn apart, heals that which has been broken, raises that which has died.

I tell them that everyone born, just by living on this planet among other people, has an obligation as a human being to declare themselves, but that the way we do that as Christians is in Baptism. When we renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy — those powers that beset us from without and those powers that well up from within — and when we



then turn from that evil to affirm that we know that it is Jesus who has by his forgiving, reconciling love saved us from ourselves, and given us the perfect example of a human life lived in fullness because it is lived in the fullness of God, and that we will follow him and find our life in him, we are telling our community, the world and our God the kind of men and women we intend to be. That we can be counted on. That we are striving to be the light, to be the leaven. Because the world needs to know.

I don't always remember to tell them that such promises made and kept will eventually require a steep cost from them. That lives lived on such principles will one day force them to crisis. Yet, from time to time people of extraordinary faith and love, baptized people who love God, do allow us to see the full power of Christian baptismal transformation in action, and to see the price of it. Such a demonstration of the power and the beauty and the sacrifice of the Christian life was brought before us on Friday, when the families of the nine people murdered in Emanuel Church in Charleston came before the court and the killer of those they loved, and one by one they offered him their forgiveness and mercy. There was nothing false or artificial about this, and all the world could see how painfully hard it was for them and how costly a sacrifice it was for them. The sister of the Reverend DePayne Middleton-Doctor wept through her brief words and said that she knows that she is herself a work in progress and acknowledged that she is angry, but said that "we are a family built on love." And she said, as she forgave the man who killed her sister, that "hate will not win." All that we were permitted to see on television was the impassive, emotionless, unmoved face of the killer, so that the language of mercy and blessing was heard as a succession of voice-overs. Hard to watch and hard to hear.

What do we renounce, and what do we affirm? People everywhere have been struck by the willingness of these victims of violence, who have lost the people closest to them in this life, to immediately forgive the killer who wantonly took those lives, and even as people of color to still bless the one whose violence was born of his racism. Their grace, that amazing grace, has touched the heart of everyone who has a heart. Yet many people while admiring that grace in these violence-torn families have confessed that they are not ready to do as they did. That for them it is still too soon to speak of forgiveness, and that they are still too angry.

Trust me when I say that I understand that. But I must also say that I am convinced, and all I learn from scripture, is that true forgiveness, if it is to happen at all, is meant to happen at once, immediately, while the offense is still a raw wound, and the pain of what was done is unbearable, and the outrage still burns white-hot in the heart. We must forgive immediately, so that what we are forgiving is still clearly obvious to us and to others, and we must do it while we are still in our suffering so that the cost of that forgiveness — the martyrdom of it — will be unmistakable. Forgiveness is not by-gones being by-gones, nor is it the exhausted resignation that may someday come when we can no longer carry the burden of recrimination and wear out, but is the way that we witness right now in the hardest hour to the saving properties of the cross of Jesus Christ, from which our dear Jesus forgave while the iron was still in his flesh. Forgiveness is a witness to the immutable love of God for every person, a love which is also our own calling as disciples, and it is a witness that that love, when it is true and godly, is unconditional. This is what we mean when we say unconditional. And forgiveness is our Christian declaration that one



may take from us everything we have — everything for which we live — but may not capture our soul. “Hate,” said Bethane Middleton-Brown, “will not win.” Hate, which is the fuel of that evil we renounced in Baptism, will not win *us*.

I think that when we say that we are not ready to forgive it is because we mistakenly think that forgiveness is a feeling, that it is the expression of an emotion. It is not. It is decision. It is obedience to command. The command to give up and give away our right to revenge, and to declare our commitment that the common humanity we share with our assailant is at least as important than anything that assailant might do to us. To forgive like that takes training, practice and preparation. I am confident that these men and women did not rise up on Friday morning and try to figure this out for the first time. They couldn't have. They have clearly been building their community of character and peace and justice and reconciliation all along, they have been holding one another accountable, they have been trying out being Christian in a shared common life, they have been reading their Bibles together and working it out, practicing forgiveness, learning how to bless, trying out mercy on one another, so that when the hardest day came and life and death would require of them their witness, their *martyrdom* to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the love of God, they would be good at it. Their spiritual muscles would be well exercised. As Bethane said through her tears, “I am still a work in progress.”

The men and women who on Friday gave their forgiveness to the young killer did so because they are serious Christians, and here perhaps is the point I want to make. When we watched the television coverage of the bond hearing, we saw the emotionless, impassive face of the man who took life, while we listened to the heartbroken voices of his victims one by one forgive him for it. It may have seemed, then, that the contrast we were seeing was between their loving, blessing, merciful forgiveness and reconciliation, as over against his hateful, racist, indifferent, evil wrath and destruction. It was not. The contrast was between them in their loving, blessing, merciful forgiveness, and all others who would claim the same name as Christian but will not bless and will not forgive. The judgment is on us.

But none of that imperative to Christian forgiveness, immediate forgiveness, mitigates in the slightest the demand that this killer be accountable for the things he has done. Nor does it diminish the responsibility, obligation and command always on us that we work tirelessly for justice and racial reconciliation. That too is Baptism. But let me say that I also think that part of our confusion about forgiveness rises from our fear that forgiveness may blunt our charge to address the injustice and inhumanity which underlies such assaults. How can we, we might ask, forgive the racist killer when we have such an urgent, pressing responsibility to challenge and overcome racism and white supremacy itself? Does forgiveness imply that one can do these terrible things with impunity? Could it give permission to others? Might forgiveness of the one who took black lives dull the edge of our insistent demand that black lives matter?

I remember that after Nelson Mandela died, President Bill Clinton was interviewed about him and about the intimate, powerful friendship that Clinton and Mandela forged with one another. Over many years the two of them talked often, sometimes daily, and Clinton spoke to the interviewer of the effects that he saw in Mandela of the 27 years of his imprisonment, and of



the abuse he suffered during that time — the torture — but also of the profound movement of reconciliation, peace and transformation of life he brought to South Africa after his release and in his presidency. Here was one who had decades of his life taken from him, who suffered the abuse of and unjust and wrathful authority, but turned to take the hand of his oppressor and offered peace for strife, forgiveness for offense, love for hate. Yet, Clinton came to understand that the anger over what had been done to him was something he carried with him always. And sometimes when they were talking, Clinton would see that some old memory of harm and hurt, some recovered memory of the years of his abuse, would well up within Mandela, and once again the anger would pass over his face as a ripple of transfiguring rage. Then, Clinton said, just as quickly you could see Mandela quite consciously, very deliberately, willfully, put that anger back down.

It was not simple for Mandela to live out and incarnate the vision of peace and justice, reconciliation and forgiveness, that he did. It was no small thing for him to lead his country through the same restorative miracles and wonders. Once, long ago, still in prison, Mandela had come to a decision about the kind of man he was going to be, and what principles he would live by. He required of himself that he sacrifice his right to rage, his claims for recompense. As he chose to be the man he became. But what Clinton saw was that that choice had to be made again hour by hour, every day, for the rest of his life. And by that steadfast courage, and refusal to let hate win, Mandela showed us what a human being made in the image of God looks like. The heights to which the soul may rise. And he showed us that forgiveness works, love of enemies is practical, and that blessing transforms everything. God changed Mandela, and Mandela changed South Africa, and the witness of South African justice born from reconciliation continues to change the world. And may I say, the families of the Charleston nine may in exactly the same way change us. I've been a Christian a long time, but on Friday, Bethane Middleton-Brown changed me.

We forgive because we are Christians and we have been told to. Because it is not an option for the baptized. But neither is the continued obligation we have been given to overcome the world an option, to make justice, to build the kingdom of righteousness, to repair the breach, to raise up those who have been put down. But remember that the forgiveness is not incompatible with the demands of justice. Indeed, it turns out that justice-making begins as an act of love, and this is how it gets done. It's very, very hard. It demands sacrifice. But actually, everything important does. Amen.