



Good Guys and Bad Guys¹

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church on 9-13-20
Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103; Romans 14:10-12; Matthew 18:21-35*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each living creature Beloved. **Amen.**

When I was a child I lived in Ventura County in southern California. There was this wonderful park in Ventura in the foothills of the mountains, called Arroyo Verde. In the forested part of the park there was a wood fort to play in. We played what we called Cowboys and Indians in that fort. The cowboys were the good guys and the Indians were the bad guys. In that game we picked up the racist, destructive and hurtful way to tell the story of American history. Who were the good guys and who were the bad guys, really?

Some of my extended relatives are among the most generous people I know. At a very difficult period in my life when I was in my early twenties, when I hit bottom through a wee little problem with acting out on multiple fronts at the same time, and I needed help, I called a relative and she came and got me, no questions asked, no judgment, only kindness,

¹ I have taken this title and idea from Jay Hornbacher, who in this week's noonday prayer described a sermon he heard long ago about good guys and bad guys.

even though I didn't deserve it. In a factory where she was employed, she also worked tirelessly to achieve zero emissions, to protect the environment, even when this was not legally required. This person was also an active alcoholic during most of this period. She is going to vote differently than I will in the next election, and believes that people with incorrect theology will go to hell. Is she a good guy or a bad guy?

The Third Precinct of the Minneapolis Police Department, which is where George Floyd was killed, has had a reputation for years of being brutal and racist. Were the people who burned down the Third Police Precinct building in Minneapolis good guys or bad guys?

I think we can all admit that stress does not bring out the best in us. What comes out in you when you are stressed? In my case, I can be tempted to react with more strength than is needed in a situation, to seek control. There have been times in doing so I have unintentionally caused harm to others. Am I a good guy or a bad guy?

I think you get the idea. The line between good and evil always runs straight through each one of us. We've all done things we're really proud of, and also things we really regret.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus says that if someone offends us, we must forgive, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times. It's hard enough to forgive the petty things in life we

know we ought to forgive, like your spouse's chronic habits that are inconsiderate and that they don't change even though you've talked with them about them a zillion times. I of course am not guilty of any of those things. But forgiving an awful thing even once can be nearly impossible. Forgiving something seven times can feel like enabling bad behavior. But forgiving seventy-seven times? That's in an entirely different ballpark. What is forgiveness? What does Jesus mean?

There is a wonderful book called *Don't Forgive Too Soon*, by Dennis, Sheila and Matt Linn that I genuinely commend to you. In it the Linns explore what they believe Jesus means when he tells us to forgive. In another part of Matthew Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, to walk two miles with Roman soldiers when they force someone to walk one. But contrary to what it sounds like, each of those actions would have been interpreted as a *challenge* to the oppression happening in the culture of Jesus' time. To turn the other cheek would require the person striking to move from backhanding in a humiliating way to hitting in the other direction as an equal. Roman soldiers were only allowed to conscript people to walk one mile – so to walk two miles with them would get them in trouble. Forgiveness, properly understood, means a creative way to neither retaliate with violence nor to passively accept abuse. Instead, forgiveness means both resisting being harmed, and also affirming the dignity of the person doing the harm and inviting better from them. In this book, the Linns describe this double movement

through an image of two hands: one hand that is held out in a “stop” gesture, and the other hand reaching out in a gesture that affirms and connects.

Forgiveness, understood in this way, requires ultimately that we recognize the utter connectedness we have with the person being forgiven. It requires lessening the way we internally and externally divide people into victims and oppressors, good guys and bad guys. It requires healing and embracing one’s own shadow instead of dividing oneself up into the “good” self which we portray to the world and the negative or “bad” self we may not want to face but that surely exists. And it requires doing the same for the person we are forgiving.

In Denmark during World War II, when the Nazis informed the Danish king that Jews would have to wear yellow stars, live in ghettos, the king replied that he himself would wear a star, and he refused to build a ghetto, and said that if one was built he and his family would also live there. When he got wind of the Nazi’s plan to deport the 7,000 Jews in Denmark, he mobilized the country. Rescue groups sprang up all over the place and got Jews to safety in Sweden. Nearly all of the 7,000 Jews in Denmark were saved, without committing violence.

Forgiveness and nonviolent resistance go together. In order to truly resist in a way that is not violent in thought, word or deed, one must see the dignity of the other and invite the

best from them. In essence, this is forgiveness. Passively allowing continued harm, when the victim has any power at all, is contrary to the will of God and hurts both the “victim” and also the “oppressor.” But to divide the world into good guys and bad guys is itself violent. It is the fundamental human temptation to become tribal—and this is also true on the political left, as it is in every human category of identity.

When Jesus tells us to forgive seventy-seven times, this is beyond our capacity to keep track of even for those who hold serious grudges. At a certain point, when someone is stuck in chronic destructive or unhealthy behavior that never gets better, it’s tempting to consider that person a “bad guy.” Instead, to forgive means, over and over again, to extend two hands—one that says, you may not take what is not yours, and the other, which says you are a human being made in the image of God and you too are being harmed by this behavior, so let’s find a creative way for you to regain your dignity. At the deepest place, forgiveness can only really happen when I see you as an equal human being. God sees us in our totality; we are to see each other in our totality.

Of course, there are certain scenarios like child abuse and sexual violence which defy forgiveness—and I know that forgiveness and healing from those things goes way beyond the scope of this short sermon. And forgiveness does not mean reconciliation, even though that topic is also beyond what I can address today. But forgiveness is about releasing oneself and one’s own character from the continued

destructive impact of another's violence, in a way that refuses to do violence in return. It means not being stuck in denial, anger, shame or hatred. This is the foundation of all nonviolent resistance. Forgiveness is becoming freed from the cycles of violence that only perpetuate hatred and more violence. It is grounded in loving our neighbors as ourselves, in inviting the best from each other as we want others to see and invite the best from us. It's what Nelson Mandela did when he walked away from twenty-five years of having been unjustly imprisoned in South Africa. He said he realized that if he hated his captors, it would poison his own soul, and they would still be bound to him. So he forgave them in order to be free himself.

At this point in our nation's history, we must become free of seeing the world in terms of good guys and bad guys. However, this doesn't mean that we say everything is OK. As Christians, following the way of Jesus is never partisan, but it is always political. We are called to repent of evils we have committed, individually and corporately, and prevent further harm—all without committing violence ourselves. We must forgive by extending two hands—one hand that says, it is wrong to continue to oppress black, indigenous, and brown bodies; and the other that says, we are all connected and we can do better because white supremacy harms both people of color and white people, and what we all need is healing and wholeness. We extend two hands—one that says, we must change how we live to stop harming this beautiful living ecosystem that is our planet, and the other that says, we too

belong here and we have a role in the delicate balance of life that exists. We forgive because God first loves us, and so we are to love all others. Jesus embodies that love and forgiveness and refusal to do violence, and his risen life is with us today to empower us to do the same.

Howard Thurman was an incredible African American pastor from the 1950s who wrote a book called *Jesus and the Disinherited*, in which he talks about the three things that help him to forgive the continued offenses he suffered as a black man in the United States. He said he could forgive because he realized that violence does also harm the oppressor, so in a sense they do receive punishment for what they do; second, because we recognize that God forgives us for the many ways we are tempted by and commit violence; and third, because we recognize that no violence or evil defines the full character of a person.²

So the next time you encounter your own anger, shame, resentment or hatred, especially during this time leading to the election--ask yourself what creative nonviolence and forgiveness would look like. Have you listened without violence to your own anger or shame and what is underneath it? Can you see the full character and dignity of the ones who are committing harm, beyond the worst they are doing? From that place, can you imagine a creative third way that says no to ongoing harm but refuses to do violence? Can you release those committing harm into the hands of God?

² Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* at 108.

Let the unending grace of God suffuse the way we see ourselves and others. May God grant us the power to forgive, to creatively resist violence, to love as God loves us. Amen.