

“A Louse on the Liver” Isaiah 40:1-11: II Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8 Psalm 85:1-2; 8-13 12-04-05

Very often in life, it is difficult for us to come to terms with the concept of forgiveness. There are those instances in which we feel we have been wronged and the thought of forgiving the person who has injured us is far from our minds. Then there are those other times, when we have caused injury to another and we wonder if we can ever be forgiven.

Our smallness in this area of human relations does not reflect the way in which God handles this sensitive issue. Yes, God did give the nation Israel a tough time throughout the Old Testament. There were times of great pain for the “chosen people,” which the stories in our Bible tell us were caused by their Maker.

But here, in this morning’s reading from the prophet Isaiah, we heard God speaking words of comfort to those same people. God tells Isaiah, in effect, that they have served their time and paid their dues. From now on, the people will be guided by a kind and gentle shepherd.

Isaiah is a book that scholars believe was written by at least three different authors at three different times in Israel’s history. They determine this by stylistic content and the time frame different sections cover. Isaiah 40-66 is known as the “Book of the Consolation of Israel.” Comfort is spoken of, for Israel’s exile is almost over. God is coming to restore them. The need to prepare a way rests with the people. They are loved and forgiven for all their trespasses.

In both of our New Testament readings we heard of the need to repent to be forgiven of our sins against God and our fellow humans. If we are truly sorry for the way we have injured God or another person, by our actions or words, we will be forgiven. John the Baptist came offering forgiveness of sins through the sacrament of baptism. He knew he was not the ultimate forgiver, but that one was coming who would be.

For many centuries people believed that the sacrament of baptism washed away all the sins that had been accumulated throughout life. Often those who held this belief would wait until they would be on their deathbeds to ask to be baptized. These last minute baptisms assured them that they could lead dissolute lives and still come out fine in the eyes of God. The slate of life was wiped clean and the newly baptized soul would ascend to God’s heaven fully forgiven, or so it was hoped.

From our scriptures, we know that God’s forgives us all if we repent for what we have done and if we extend that forgiveness to others. Not an easy task at all.

Sometimes, I like to think, although I could be dead wrong, that when we step back from our injuries and look at the broader scope of life, we can see that we do not gain anything by holding on to age old grudges.

As always, my mother would have some interesting commentary on this. When someone would seem to be particularly stirred up and resentful about something, my mother used to say that he or she “certainly had a louse on his or her liver over that.” I knew that she meant that something made someone angry or unforgiving or upset over something that may have happened long ago. Concerned about the source of such a quote, I “Googled” “louse on the liver” and only came up with a lot of reading about liver diseases and the prevalence of lice. But, I deduced that if someone had a louse on his or her liver, he or she would have a very tender or sore spot. And

that is what a festering old injury or hurt brings us all, isn't it? A sensitive, sore spot whenever it is prodded.

Lewis Smedes in a little book entitled, Forgive and Forget, Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve,* writes that there are four stages in forgiveness. Those of "hurt, hate, healing and coming together." It, as all things in life, is a process of moving forward and moving away from the past that so often binds us and keeps us from positive growth. In true forgiveness, the "louse" is removed from our livers and the sensitive spot goes away.

Smedes says this far more eloquently when he writes: "Forgiving, then, is a new vision and a new feeling that is given to the person who forgives." "So when you forgive you must often be content with the editing of your own memory. It is the editing of your memory that is your salvation." Interesting words.

The person forgiven may not even care that you have let him or her off the hook. But we know, deep within, that as far as we are concerned, we are back in right relationship with ourselves and with God.

God must spend a lot of time editing the Divine memory when we consider God is all forgiveness. But our Maker could certainly not dwell on all the hurts we deal one another or other countries or entire groups of people. God's hope for us is that we continue to learn and grow from living life and that we will all become better people. That was God's hope for Israel and for the people in those early churches and it is certainly God's hope for us.

The candle of Hope first pierced the darkness, now that of Forgiveness joins it. These two qualities of the soul need to be reawakened, examined and put into play as we move forward to the birth of the one who taught us to treasure them both. Amen

*Forgive and Forget, Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve, Lewis B. Smedes, 1984, Harper and Row, Publishers, San Francisco, p. 28.