

Forgiveness – The True Story Behind Saint Valentine’s Day

Discovering that my February sermon was Valentine’s Day weekend, I thought it would be interesting to explore the history and the roots of this holiday. I was surprised – and you might be, too – to learn that some suggest that the holiday traces all the way back to Chaucer in the 14th century, when he wrote – and forgive my pronunciation of the Middle English –

For this was on seynt Volantynys day
When every byrd cometh there to chese his make
(ie ‘when every bird comes to choose his mate)

The lines were part of a poem written to honor the first anniversary of the engagement of King Richard II to Anne of Bohemia.

If there’s dispute about the holiday’s Chaucerian roots, there’s no debate that on Valentine’s Day – ie February 14th – in the year 1400, a “High Court of Love” was established in Paris. That court dealt with love contracts, betrayals and violence against women. Its judges were selected by women on the basis of a poetry-reading competition – sort of the first ‘poetry slams’.

Despite these early references, it’s clear that the popular mass-appeal celebration is of relatively recent origin. The modern reinvention of Saint Valentine’s Day has been traced to the 1840s. A writer in *Graham’s American Monthly* observed in 1849, “Saint Valentine’s Day... is becoming, nay it has become, a national holyday,” and the first mass-produced valentines of embossed paper lace were produced and sold shortly after 1847 by Esther Howland (1828-1904) of Worcester, Massachusetts. Today approximately one billion valentines are sent each year worldwide, making the day the second largest card-sending holiday of the year behind Christmas. And, by the way, women purchase approximately 85 percent of all valentines.

But why “Saint Valentine?” How did a Roman-era martyr get associated with a celebration of romantic love? Well, there is a connection, in legend at least. But in researching that history, I found that the real story of Valentine’s life – and of his feast day – is a more complex lesson about compassion and unconditional forgiveness.

Everything we know about Saint Valentine we owe to the writings of Venerable Bede, the Benedictine monk of northern England who straddled the 7th and 8th centuries. Because he wrote the first history of the English people, Bede is considered the father of English history. But to our point, he also wrote the “*Legenda Aurea*,” – the Golden Legend – which told the lives of the saints. It’s there that we learn the story of Saint Valentine. According to that version, St Valentine was persecuted as a Christian and interrogated by the Roman Emperor Claudius II in person. Claudius was impressed by Valentine and had a discussion with him, attempting to get him to convert to Roman paganism in order to save his life. Valentine refused and tried to convert Claudius to Christianity instead. Because of this Claudius ordered his execution and threw him into the prison in Rome to await his fate.

To fully appreciate the climax of the Valentine story, let me tell you a bit about the prisons of Rome (with a nod to Dr. Bennie Crockett's article, "Prisons of the First Century). According to Dr. Crockett:

People greatly feared the prison in Rome, a facility used for serious offenders and those who had no social standing. Later named the Mamertine prison, it had a chamber 12 feet underground called the Tullianum. The Roman historian and politician, Sallust, wrote that the Tullianum was an enclosure with walls all around and a chamber above with a stone roof. Its conditions were hideous and fearful because of the neglect of the prisoners, the darkness inside and the putrid smell ... The prisoners' food ... gave no satisfaction but also would not permit one to die ... (and) became mixed with the unsanitary conditions of their personal uncleanness. The resulting smell was so offensive that people tried to avoid even going near the prison.

No one knows how long Valentine spent in the Mamertine before his execution, but it's safe to say it wasn't an overnight stay. Against this backdrop of extended, unjust and cruel imprisonment, torture and execution that the *Legenda Aurea* tells this story of Valentine's last day:

... then he prayed to God, saying: Lord Jesu Christ very God, which art very light, enlumine this house in such wise that they that dwell therein may know thee to be very God. And the (jailer) said: I marvel me that thou sayest that thy God is very light, and nevertheless, if he may make my daughter to hear and see, which long time hath been blind

Bede's history goes on to say that Valentine, his heart filled with compassion and forgiveness for the jailer and his long-blind daughter, restored her sight through intercessionary prayer.

A later embellishment to the Golden Legend adds that on the evening before his execution, Valentine wrote a note addressed to the young girl. The note allegedly signed "from your Valentine."

From the thin thread of that apocryphal signature spins the association of Saint Valentine with romantic love. Lost in the telling is the far more compelling story of Valentine's compassion and unconditional forgiveness. And that lesson is curious indeed, since it stands in such stark contrast to the premise that forgiveness is conditional, as exemplified, for example, in the Christian practice of confession.

In the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, forgiveness of sins happens through priestly mediation. Even those among us from non-Catholic traditions know that drill – we've seen it in enough TV and movie dramas – and there was even a *Seinfeld* episode where Jerry goes to a priest in the confessional. In the Protestant traditions it happens through one's confession directly to god without an intermediary priest. But in both traditions the essence is the same: the granting of forgiveness is conditional upon the offender's expression of remorse and petition for pardon.

The Catholic practice is particularly interesting because it rests, theologically, on the interpretation of a text found only in the gospel of John – 20: 21-23 to be exact. It occurs, as the gospel story goes, shortly after the resurrection. The disciples were fearful and huddled together in the room where they all shared the last supper. Jesus appears to them, shows them his wounds, and after a greeting supposedly says:

As the father has sent me, so I send you ... he breathed on them and said,
“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven;
if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.”

Commonly known as “The Great Commission,” this passage is said to show that Jesus gives the disciples the duty and authority to go forth and preach Jesus’ message of love and forgiveness. Most Christian denominations, and the Catholic church in particular, also read into this passage the justification for creating an ordained ministry or priesthood, but that’s not what I’d like to call attention to. Rather, it’s the interpretation of the lines about forgiving and not forgiving:

If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.

As I said before, the Protestant and Catholic traditions diverge on whether this passage vests in the clergy some special delegated power of God to wipe clean the sin-soiled soul of the sinner. But all converge on the belief that the offender’s petitioning for forgiveness is necessary. The commentary on this gospel passage by Methodism’s founder, John Wesley, is particularly illuminating in this regard. Says Wesley:

Whosoever sins ye remit - (... that is, supposing them to repent and believe) they are remitted, and whosoever sins ye retain (supposing them to remain impenitent) they are retained.

Note his use of the phrase, “supposing them to repent...” Wesley’s wording very clearly summarizes the proposition that forgiveness of sin is conditional upon the sinner’s repentance. But where do you find that in the original text? Let me read that again:

If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.

The original gospel text might be called the “Great Commission,” but I call the traditional interpretation “The Great Presumption.” The gospel text doesn’t have Jesus saying something like, “A sinner who contritely petitions your forgiveness is forgiven if you choose to forgive him, and not forgiven if you don’t.” In fact, the sinner or the offender isn’t even mentioned.

No, Jesus’ message about forgiving is much simpler and directed solely at the disciples. “Whose sins YOU shall forgive, they are forgiven.” Recognize where the forgiving is happening – in the disciples! The message to the disciples – and to us – in more modern idiom I think would go something like this: If you let it go, it’s done with; if you don’t, it stays with you.

Certainly that’s the lesson of the Saint Valentine story. In the face of his unjust and torturous imprisonment and execution, does he call down the wrath of a justice-wielding

God in retribution? No. He took compassion on his jailer and called forth healing mercy to cure the jailer's long-blind daughter – no strings attached. That's the lesson held up to us as the model in all the lives of the saints. And isn't that the message of our own Universalist heritage? Divine love and forgiveness is unconditional, and we are all invited to take the spiritual journey to that place in our own hearts.

Now even if we accept the aspirational ideal of unconditional – I prefer the word preemptive – forgiveness, what can be said – how does one speak – to an individual's felt need to hear an apology? A good question that we'll have to address. But before doing that, let me tell you about the Babemba people of South Africa.

In his book, "The Art of Forgiveness, Loving-kindness and Peace," renowned Buddhist teacher, Jack Kornfield tells the amazing – and to most of us I think the counterintuitive – approach to forgiveness:

"In the Babemba tribe of South Africa, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he is placed in the center of the village, alone and unfettered. All work ceases, and every man, woman, and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual. Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, each recalling the good things the person in the center of the circle has done in his lifetime. Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with any detail and accuracy, is recounted. All his positive attributes, good deeds, strengths, and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length. This tribal ceremony often lasts for several days. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe." [p. 42]

Now you may or may not find merit in the Babemba way. You may or may not see it as a practice that we should adopt. But one thing is certain: it demonstrates that ideas about forgiveness and how to re-establish relationship are culturally shaped. And what is culturally shaped can be reshaped. If there is will to do so.

So, why cultivate and encourage the practice of preemptive forgiveness? Why transform our thinking to see forgiveness not as a deal – not as a transaction – but rather as a grace – a gift? Why? Because it's good for you – you, the person who feels injured. Research over at least the two decades shows that consistently.

Robert Enright, professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin and the founder of the International Forgiveness Institute has been researching forgiveness since 1985. Summarizing the research from five different studies on populations of mixed gender and age, Enright notes: "Those who learn to forgive improve their physical health, lower anxiety, lower psychological depression, lower anger, increase a sense of well-being, increase self-esteem, and increase hope."

Psychologists and psychiatrists have also begun noting reductions in anger, depression, and anxiety in patients who forgive their offenders. Richard Fitzgibbons, a Philadelphia psychiatrist who helped introduce forgiveness to the mental health field, sees among his forgiving patients "an enhanced ability to trust, a freedom from subtle control of individuals and events from the past, and increased feelings of love."

In 1998 the John Templeton Foundation contributed almost \$5 million to twenty-nine new projects in forgiveness research related to both physical and mental health. One grant recipient is Frederic Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project at the Stanford Center for Research and Disease Prevention. Luskin, who became interested in the field when he noticed his own inability to forgive a friend's betrayal, has found that forgiving protects against disease and improves emotional health. People who forgive become less angry and more optimistic. In one experiment, fifty-five volunteers were asked to think of someone they had not forgiven for something and to rate their level of hurt on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most hurt. Most ranked their hurt at 8. After undergoing forgiveness training, involving meditation, cognitive therapy and without engaging the offender, most ranked their hurt at about 3. Ten weeks later, the level stayed the same. "You can train people to forgive quickly," Luskin reports.

More interesting still is Luskin's ongoing study at Stanford and Seattle involving people who, by their own assessment, had been wronged or victimized. Luskin reports that serenity, ie "having no resentment left," comes not through any act of forgiving. In fact, all reported that the more they tried to forgive in some formal, conscious or organized way, the harder it became and the more resentment they felt. What worked was to stop working at forgiving and "just let go."

That's what Fr. Lawrence Martin Jenco had to do. His name might be familiar. In the early 1990s he was the program director for Catholic Relief Services in Beirut. Jenco was kidnapped by Shiite Muslims and kept in a series of makeshift prisons for 564 days. Despite beatings, starvation, isolation, mental cruelty, and unsanitary conditions, the priest could write these words to his family at Christmas 1991:

Dear brothers and sisters,

If I am to die, I hope that I would die with the words of Jesus on my lips: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Please do not hate them...

Much love, Larry

Several months later, while still captive, he learned that his captors had kept the letter, never mailing it. One of these men read Jenco's own words back to him, "not because he wanted me to know it had not been sent; rather he used its words to ask for forgiveness," explains Jenco, in his book, *Bound to Forgive*.

Toward the end of Jenco's captivity, a particularly brutal captor named Sayeed asked Jenco's forgiveness for the beatings he had inflicted on him. "I was called to forgive, to let go of revenge, retaliation, and vindictiveness," writes Jenco. "And I was challenged to forgive him unconditionally. I could not forgive him on the condition that he change his behavior to conform to my wishes and values; I had no control over his response." Jenco did forgive Sayeed.

Jenco's story highlights one of the more remarkable consequences of preemptive, forgiveness. It often has the paradoxical effect of encouraging the other person or persons to change their behavior.

It seems that if you preemptively forgive someone, that person usually senses it and feels less uncomfortable around you, even if you never discuss it. We have to acknowledge that people -- frail human beings that we all are -- can be too scared or too scarred, too proud or

too sure of the rightness of their own positions to engage the issue directly. So, even if you never discuss it, they can become able to see you without being haunted by the thought of the hurt they caused in you. Your presence no longer reminds them of their own feelings and failings. And they can stop blaming you for sparking their own discomfort or guilt. Even if your forgiveness does not always have a perceptible impact they might be capable of engaging and changing in the future.

This is the lesson of the passage in the gospel of Luke (7: 36-50) in which Jesus explains that people become more loving after they are forgiven. As Luke tells it, Jesus is dining at the house of a Pharisee named Simon. While there, a woman of low repute barges in and, weeping, kisses Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair. Brushing aside Simon's rebuke of both the woman and Jesus for having anything to do with her, Jesus says, *"Therefore I tell you, her sins which were many have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love."*

"Hence" means "for this reason," or "therefore," or "from this source," or "from this time forward." Jesus seems to be saying that ever since she was forgiven, the sinner has shown great love. The following line supports that all the more strongly when Jesus adds: *"But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."*

By embracing preemptive forgiveness and letting go the thought, or the requirement, of prior apology we can better create the possibility for exactly that as a consequence. As we embrace metanoia – the change of our own heart – and see forgiveness not as the end point but rather the ground of – the starting point – of a process, then with time and with love and with luck we can find authentic reconciliation as the outcome.

In any case, like Saint Valentine in the hands of his wrongdoers, you're free from bitterness, vengefulness, anger, hatred.

Meditative Invitation

And so, in closing, let's take a moment to quietly reflect. First acknowledge the shame or disappointment that we deserve to forgive ourselves for. And second acknowledge that anger toward someone else that we hold onto. Take this quiet moment to accept these frailties of our humanness and to begin to forgive – begin to let it go.

Blessed be.

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