

**The First Word: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing'
Luke 32: 34**

On Sept. 8, 1974, then President Gerald Ford pardoned his predecessor, Richard Nixon, for his involvement in the Watergate scandal. Nixon was never brought to trial and never, in a legal sense, held accountable for his misdeeds. In the text of his pardon, Gerald Ford said the following: "My conscience tells me clearly and certainly that I cannot prolong the bad dreams that continue to reopen a chapter that is closed." In his response to the pardon, Richard Nixon did not exactly admit his guilt in the dirty dealings of the Watergate affair. He spoke only of being wrong in "Not acting more decisively and more forthrightly in dealing with Watergate."

Now why do I bring up this 30 year old controversy today on Good Friday? The reason is this: I was a young philosophy major in 1974 with a passion for what T.S. Eliot speaks of in his lengthy poetic masterpiece, *The Four Quartets*: "Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us/ to purify the dialect of the tribe/ and urge the mind to aftersight and foresight..."

As a young woman from a family in which calm, reasonable discourse was the very rare exception rather than the rule, where anger was allowed free rein and where hurtful barbs were tossed without restraint, I longed for a world in which words were used with care and precision, meanings were always transparent, and where rational reflection would overcome unreasonable reaction. My naive hope was that clarity of language would result in purity of action. I was, therefore, bothered by President Ford's pardon of Nixon because I could only think of terms like "pardon" and "forgiveness" as indicating a reciprocal relationship: "I repent and, in response to my repentance and full confession, you then will forgive." But Richard Nixon did not seem to me to have in any full sense confessed; therefore was not the Presidential pardon invalid? In my young, idealistic mind, the logic of what was involved in a pardon had been violated.

Of course, what I didn't understand at the time was the nature of a *legal* pardon. In legal terms, according to a wise lawyer of my acquaintance, a pardon is a "setting aside" of an offense, a way of avoiding the consequences of a prolonged and painful revisiting of the wrongs committed and the harm done. A legal pardon in this sense is not the same as a moral judgment on the harmful deeds committed. It is a prerogative of the Crown, a gesture of humanity, and a way for a community to move on. This is exactly what Gerald Ford meant in his words: "I cannot prolong the bad dreams that continue to reopen a chapter that is closed." The pardon did not require a "pure and contrite heart" on the part of Richard Nixon. The book was closed.

Jesus said: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."

In Luke's gospel, they (presumably those responsible for the crucifixion) have not asked for forgiveness nor have they uttered words of repentance or contrition. There is no reciprocity in this act of forgiveness that Jesus asks of the Father. What do these words of Jesus tell us about the nature of forgiveness?

Presumably all of us have people in our lives who have harmed us and in relation to whom questions about forgiveness arise. We ourselves may also be among those who have done harm and need forgiveness. Therefore the question: "Is forgiveness a term that has meaning only in a reciprocal relationship?" may be relevant to all of us. Can we

forgive in a situation where there has been no repentance? Can we repent in a situation where no forgiveness is forthcoming? Is the logic of the term “forgiveness” such that reciprocal actions of repentance and pardon cannot exist without each other?

I looked up the word “forgiveness” in my big Oxford dictionary, and some interesting ideas were suggested. According to the Oxford, “to forgive” can mean “to cease to resent or claim requital for”, “to give up resentment against”. These ideas suggest that forgiveness is possible even when there is no reciprocity: I can forgive regardless of whether or not the conditions of true repentance have been met. The work of an act of forgiveness may come from one side only. I find this idea to be very powerful. It is sadly quite possible to become locked in a life-suffocating dance of resentment and bitterness if we demand repentance before we will consider forgiving those who have harmed us. But if we are able to take the initiative to “give up resentment”; to dispense with the cold comfort of our tightly held blanket of what seems like justified anger and condemnation, then we can, regardless of the actions and attitude of our partner in this dance, move into the freedom of forgiveness.

We can't change the things that have been done to us, but we can control the ways in which we react to those actions. This is not to say that “giving up resentment” is easy or quick. Rowan Williams has made an interesting comment on forgiveness: God doesn't forgive us because we are good; he makes us good by forgiving us.” God does not demand the repentance first. The act of forgiveness opens the door that makes the repentance possible, but not guaranteed.

I think that what Jesus is doing on the cross in these first words, “Father, forgive them.” is taking that first step, which only the harmed and wounded can take: “I will give up my resentment; I will cease to demand your repentance.” This is not the same as denying the real harm that has been done, or saying “It's OK, it doesn't matter.” The harms done to us and the harms we do to others are real and **do** matter. But what Jesus shows us is that we need not be locked in the deadly dance of reciprocity: “I will not forgive until you repent”. We can fully acknowledge the damage done to us and yet still take that first step of “giving up resentment” that lies at the heart of forgiveness, even though it does not guarantee repentance. The truth of forgiveness is that we may have to leave the other half of the story in God's hands hoping, but perhaps never knowing, that in taking that difficult first step we may have made the other's repentance possible. God's logic may be much deeper than ours.

Mary Lu Redden: Good Friday, 2008