Forgiveness as a Demand of Love

Lawrence E. Frizzell, Seton Hall University
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Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ

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FORGIVENESS AS A DEMAND OF LOVE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Many of us turn to the comics in the daily newspaper for some relief from the tribulations and tragedies of current events. As we look at human relationships portrayed by the artist, the flaws and limitations of given cultures and personality types become clear. To laugh when we recognize ourselves in a given situation probably implies humility, but perhaps this insight into a foible of the human condition should challenge us also to overcome it. The contrast between Hagar the Horrible and his young peace-loving son Hamlet is amusing but still today some parents teach children to "get even" for wrongs committed against them. Many factors lie behind the violence of our society and among nations, but high among them is this "rule of retaliation."

"I have killed a man for wounding me, a boy for bruising me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (Gn 4:23-24). This ancient boast expresses the adage "might makes right"; the fact that so many people and nations operate on this level makes us aware that civilization is very fragile. In antiquity Hebrew law tried to limit retaliation by strict controls. "An eye for an eye..." (Ex 21:22-24; Lv 24:17-22) was a great improvement over Lamech's attitude; before the time of Jesus it was replaced by monetary fines, which made much more sense.

Sometimes it is said that Judaism lacks a teaching of forgiveness. The beautiful passage from Jesus ben Sira, a sage from early in the second century B.C., shows that this statement is inaccurate. The familiar commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself is preceded by these words: "Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your fellow countryman" (Lv 19:18). Of course, both Jew and Christian need continuing education in the sources of their faith and way of life!

Sira knew that our relationship with God demands that we treat all those created in his image and likeness the way we would like to be treated by God. "Should a person nourish anger against a neighbor and expect healing from the Lord?" This is an example of the principle "measure for measure" in the moral life. "The measure with which you measure will in turn be measured out to you" (Lk 6:38, with Mk 4:24 indicating the God will not be outdone in generosity).

Jesus knew that forgiveness is one of the most difficult challenges in human life. The Lord's Prayer demands imitation of divine love by focusing on forgiveness. This is the only petition that requires an explanation. "If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you and your transgression" (Mt 6:14-15).

The discussion about "fraternal correction" (Mt 18:15-18) led Peter to inquire if there are limits to the demand of forgiveness. Seven is the number that symbolizes totality and perfection. So
Peter wonders if that is sufficient. Jesus refers back to the Lamech's boast and shows, as in his own suffering and death, that far greater (spiritual) strength is shown by the one who is persecuted and forgives than by the person who seeks revenge.

The parable about the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:21-35) makes the same point as the explanation of the petition "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Mt 6:12, 14-15). Again and again we need the cleansing power and strength provided by the Blood of the new and eternal Covenant to enable us to live this aspect of the commandment of love in our daily lives.