

## **The Arsenal of Grace**

Based on Chapter 10, What's So Amazing about Grace by Philip Yancey

Matthew 23:1-10, 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13 By Patty Friesen (November 5/23)

In our gospel reading from Matthew 23, Jesus shows the way to peace with humility. In our Epistle reading today from 1 Thessalonians, Paul reminds the church in Thessaloniki, that he came in humility as a parent encouraging faith in God which is a work in progress in all of us. Paul is intent on maintaining early Christian communities, united in their loyalty to Jesus as Lord, right under the nose of Caesar, who prided himself on maintaining in a forced unity of peoples under his own rule as lord of the Roman Empire. The unity of Christians across economic, cultural, religious barriers is a sign to the principalities and powers that a greater rule than theirs has now begun (see, e.g., Gal 4:1-11; Eph 3:10). Maintaining that unity and peace, then, is not just a matter of preventing squabbles and bad feelings in the church. Grace and forgiveness is part of the essential Christian witness to the one Lord for the whole world.

Two peacemakers who visited a group of Polish Christians in 1955 asked them, "Would you be willing to meet with other Christians from West Germany? They want to ask forgiveness for what Germany did to Poland during the war and to begin to build a new relationship." At first there was silence. Then one Pole spoke up. "What you are making is impossible. Each stone of Warsaw is soaked in Polish blood! We cannot forgive!"

Before the group parted, however, they said the Lord's Prayer together. When they reached the words "forgive us our sins as we forgive..." everyone stopped praying. Tension swelled in the room. The Pole who had spoken so vehemently said, "I must say

yes to you. I could no more pray the Our Father, I could no longer call myself a Christian, if I refuse to forgive. Humanly speaking, I cannot do it, but God will give us strength!" Eighteen months later the Polish and West German Christians met together in Vienna, establishing friendships that continue to this day.

When Berlin's mayor Willy Brandt visited Warsaw in 1970, he fell to his knees before the memorial to the victims of the Warsaw ghetto "This gesture was not planned," he wrote.: Oppressed by the memories of Germany's recent history, I simply did what people do when words fail them." Today, German school children learn details of the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes. In 1990 the world watched a drama of forgiveness enacted on the stage of world politics. After East Germany chose a parliament in its first free elections, the representatives convened to take up the reins of government. The Communist bloc was changing daily. West Germany was proposing the radical step of reunification. For their first official act, however East Germany decided to vote on this extraordinary statement, drafted in the language of theology, not politics:

We, the first freely elected parliamentarians of the German Democratic Republic, on behalf to the citizens of this land, admit responsibility for the humiliation, expulsion and murder of Jewish men, women and children. We feel sorrow and shame, and acknowledge this burden of German history...Immeasurable suffering was inflicted on the peoples of the world during the era of national socialism. We ask all the Jews of the world to forgive us. We ask the people of Israel to forgive us for the hypocrisy and hostility of official East German policies toward Israel and for the persecution and humiliation of Jewish citizens in our country after 1945.

East Germany's parliament passed the statement unanimously. Members rose to their feet for a long ovation and then paused for a moment of silence in memory of the Jews who had died in the Holocaust. What did such an act of parliament accomplish? Certainly, it did not bring the murdered Jews back to life or undo the monstrous deeds of Nazism. Not, but it helped loosen the stranglehold of guilt that had been choking East Germans for nearly half a century - five decades in which their government had steadfastly denied any need for forgiveness.

For its part, West Germany had already repented officially for the abominations. In addition, West Germany has paid out sixty billion dollars in reparations to Jews. The fact that a relationship exists at all between Germany and Israel is a stunning demonstration of transnational forgiveness. Grace has its own arsenal, even in international politics. (p. 123-125)

Theological Paul Tillich once defined forgiveness as remembering the past in order that it might be forgotten - a principle that applies to nations as well as individuals. Though forgiveness is never easy, and may take generations, what else can break the chains that enslave people to their historical past?

The Cold War, says former Senator Sam Nunn, ended "not in a nuclear inferno, but in a blue of candles in the churches of Eastern Europe." Candlelight processions in East Germany, first a few hundred, then a thousand, then thirty thousand, fifty thousand, and finally five hundred thousand - nearly the entire population of Leipzig turned out for candlelight vigils.

After a prayer meeting at St. Nicolai Church, the peaceful protestors would march through the dark streets, singing hymns. Police and soldiers with all their weapons

seem powerless against such an arsenal of grace. Ultimately, on the night a similar march in East Berlin attracted one million protestors, the hated Berlin Wall came tumbling down without a shot being fired. A huge banner appeared across a Leipzig street: *Wir danken Dir, Kirche* (We thank you, church.)

Like a gale of pure air driving out stagnant clouds of pollution, peaceful revolution spread across the globe. In 1989 alone ten nations - Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Yugoslavia, Mongolia and the Soviet Union - comprising of half a billion people experienced nonviolent revolutions. In many of these, the Christian minority played a crucial role.

Then in 1994 came the most surprising revolution of all in South Africa, surprising because nearly everyone expected bloodshed alone would break down the racial apartheid. South Africa was where Mohandas Gandhi, studying Fyodor Tolstoy (a Russian writer) and the Sermon on the Mount from the bible, developed his strategy of nonviolence to free India from British rule. With much opportunity to practice, South Africans had perfected the use of the arsenal of grace.

Nelson Mandela emerged from 26 years of imprisonment with a message of forgiveness and reconciliation, not revenge. F.W. De Klerk himself, elected from the smallest and most strictly Calvinistic of the South African churches, felt what he later described as a strong sense of calling. He told his congregation that God was calling him to save all the people of South Africa, black and white even though he knew that would mean rejection by the whites. Archbishop Desmond Tutu led the process of Truth and Reconciliation saying, "No one can forgive on behalf of victims, victims have to forgive for themselves. And no one can forgive without full disclosure: what happened

and who did what must first be revealed. Also, those who committed the atrocities must agree to ask for forgiveness before it can be granted.”

What does all this mean currently in the Ukrainian/Russian and Israeli/Palestinian wars? Andrew Cohen writing in the Phoenix on Oct. 13/23, p. A4 says,

*The greatest temptation for Israel is to lay siege to Gaza, to extirpate and eliminate Hamas in house to house fighting that will consume Israeli troops like the Germans at Stalingrad. Or, to bomb it into the Stone Age like the Russians are doing to Ukraine. Netanyahu will surely have license to act rashly from the world and from Israelis, especially under the cover of a united national government.*

But would that be wise? Would killing untold civilians turn a military disaster into a moral one? What would wanton killing out of revenge do to the Israeli or Ukrainian soul? Israel will have to respond furiously, but we hope, judiciously.

Nations that pursue forgiveness for past wrongs, despite the complexity and expense may at least avoid the awful consequences of the alternative - violent revolution and civil war. Instead of civil war in South Africa, the world was treated to the sight of black South Africans in lines a mile long, dancing in jubilation over their first-ever opportunity to vote.

Because it goes against human nature, forgiveness must be taught and practiced, as one would practice any difficult craft. “Forgiveness is not just an occasional act: it is a permanent attitude,” said Martin Luther King Jr. What greater gift could Christians give to the world than the forming of a culture that upholds the arsenal of grace and forgiveness? (p. 135-137).

Let us pray: God of grace, thank you that Jesus shows us the way to peace.

Grant us the wisdom and the courage to follow in this path. Amen.

Sing: God of Abraham and Sarah #804