

My Small Sins, Their Great Wrongs

I sometimes think that we fail to appreciate the contributions that the world of art and artists could make to our understanding of things; just as someone trained in the sciences, I find it often frustrates me that in general people fail to appreciate the contribution that the sciences and the scientific approach can make to everyday life. Of course that depends upon our willingness to apply the principles found there. For example, the sciences can teach a useful approach to a problem...any problem...not just one in biology, chemistry or physics. You look at a situation; you examine the moving parts, how they interact, and what happens when you move them one part at a time. That is basically the scientific method. The principle from the world of fine arts which applies most widely and is most widely ignored in human interactions where it could be of use in our everyday life is that of perspective; and that is especially true when it comes to human relationships and our tendencies to pass judgments on issues and one another. In the world of art, the definition of perspective is that it is the process of drawing solid objects which are three dimensional onto a two-dimensional surface so as to give the right impression of their height, width, depth, and position in relation to each other when viewed from a particular point. There are two aspects of this definition to keep in mind when it is taken from the realm of the art world and used in the broader sense and a general sense or application. The artist uses a process to give a RIGHT impression of something that has THREE dimensions when it is viewed from ONE point showing only TWO of those three dimensions. Can you see how even in the world of art, a different artist looking at the same three dimensional object might present a different two dimensional one point view, thus creating an entirely different picture or work of art—equally real? And that becomes what we often overlook about perspective when it moves into our daily interactions. The fact that two perspectives can be equally real. We use the second definition of perspective found in the dictionary often when discussing books, movies or plays and how a particular author, playwright or director presents a topic or scene. That definition is of perspective is a particular attitude toward or way of regarding something. When the “something” is not personal, other perspectives are easy to consider and discuss; when the something being considered IS personal, not so much. And that is so often the problem when we are in community...when we gather...or especially when we have to establish rules a group needs to be able to agree to abide by in order for peace and accord to exist; especially if our backgrounds are different, our life experiences are varied, and so on. Looking at...and considering something...almost anything from someone else’s perspective is not an easy process. And the wider and more varied the group which is included in the discussion, the more difficult the discussion becomes, the more likely there are to be disagreements and the easier it becomes to not listen to one another. It seems we have reached a very real and difficult place where this is a truth of our reality today. It still amazes me when I come to the scriptures which the established lectionary gives me to consider each week, how the Holy Spirit opens them in such a way that they seem to have something to say about what is happening around us—probably because human nature has not really changed no matter how much we would like to think that we have. The early church Paul was addressing in Rome was struggling to come to terms with how to live in a community where the backgrounds of those who were coming to believe were very different. On the surface this seems to be about dietary habits...which discussion appears in various forms in

several places within scripture. There were strict dietary rules within Judaism which those believers who came from that tradition wished to keep while those who entered the faith from outside Judaism did not necessarily want to adopt these ways. To Paul the issue was more basic than diet, it was to establish that it was God's redemptive action through Christ, not adherence to the Mosaic Law that was at work...so the believers were not to judge one another based on dietary behavior. The Romans passage concludes with this admonishment which seems to apply to both sides of the argument going on in Rome: "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then, each of us will be accountable to God." This passage is often used to simply teach Christians not to let little things come between them. This was not a little thing at the time. Paul is challenging the believers in Rome not to be judgmental, not to "despise" those whose perspective is different from theirs. This has unfortunately become the common response of our culture...to judge and demonize those with whom we disagree; to become angry if it is even implied that you believe something different from what they believe...it is as if there are battle lines drawn...even between and among those calling themselves disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. In the modern world, we are aware that people from other parts of the world, and those of different religions, think differently. What we seem to have more difficulty understanding that even some of the people who live not that far from us, who have grown up very near us, have still had very different experiences in that growing up...and still are treated very differently by the society and institutions of this society than we are...and therefore, they have a different perspective on the society and the conditions which exist. We often can gain more by listening...truly listening than by imposing our views on others...listening with open minds...not with preformed ideas about what we will hear...perhaps expecting to hear a different perspective on the events happening. This is where the concept of different perspectives brings us to the passage from Matthew and Peter's struggle with this concept of forgiveness...how many times Lord? Peter's approach to this matter of forgiveness seems to have been very pragmatic...he wanted to keep score..."Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Sounds generous, doesn't? When someone hurts or wrongs us, we usually do keep count...and are very aware of their transgression. Often, however, when we have said or done something which has hurt someone else, is our memory as good? In a few short weeks, we will have as a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures what is known there as the Ten Words—or more commonly the Ten Commandments. When we consider them, most of us usually give ourselves a pretty good grade on our ability to obey those...at least the literal interpretations...we don't murder, steal, etc. So you can begin to see where the sermon title was derived...that sense of perspective about our own wrongdoing, how our often perception of how others have harmed us is so different...how our relationships with others are affected by this ability or inability to step outside our own perspective before we make judgments. Because all of these issues are present when we begin this process of understanding we are to go about this issue of forgiving as we are forgiven as we pray in the prayer taught to us by our Lord? When Peter posed this question to Jesus, "Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'" In some translations because of the differences in the handling of numbers the translations reads seventy times seven. It really doesn't matter...the number is

vastly more than what Peter could envision on his own. Then Jesus illustrated forgiveness in the kingdom of God with a parable. In this parable the king, who wishes to settle his accounts with his slaves instead of selling the slave, his wife and all of his possessions forgives him all that owed vast amount when he could not pay it. When learning that this same slave could not forgive a debt of one tenth that amount owed to him, he then became angry and not only rescinded the forgiveness but threw the slave into prison. Jesus ends this parable with: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart." So again, we come to the point that community relationship are central to citizenship within the kingdom of God...to the community that Christ calls us to be. Just as love is the essential element in building the community, to maintain the relationship forgiveness has to be a part of the interactions at all times. The reign of God on both of these points definitely does not work as the world works. What Jesus tells Peter is that he wants Peter to stop keeping score...to stop counting altogether simply because forgiveness, like love is inherently and intimately relational rather than legal and therefore cannot be counted. Had Peter asked Jesus how many times he should love his neighbor, we'd perceive his misunderstanding: love can't be quantified or counted. But he asks about forgiveness and we miss his mistake. The king in the parable who represents God's grace in the total forgiving of all of our transgressions...they are no longer counted because God so loves us. Perhaps we need to consider that one of the reasons we have trouble with the forgiving of others, that one of the reasons we feel the need to hold onto our sense of being in the right while others are in the wrong so that we cannot see other's perspectives is that we resemble those early believers who wanted to hold onto adherence to the Law as their justification because believing in God's total and absolute gift of grace is so unlike our experience of the world. In the midst of all the turmoil around us, we all need to be open to the perspectives of others, to the experiences of others, to understand that wrongs have been done and people have suffered because of them. This past week there have been reminders of the events of 9/11, just as there needs to be reminders of other horrific events from the Holocaust of Nazi Germany to the hangings in Wilmington or Alabama. Those who suffered, who were victims or children of victims: all of these cases need to have their stories heard. The suffering needs to be acknowledged; the causes which contributed need to be acknowledged. But in time, all involved need always to forgive the wound. But to also always remember without hatred, to remember without retribution, to remember for the sake of tomorrow so that the events do not happen again. When we come to this topic of forgiveness we need to remember that our Lord wants us to stop counting our grievances, to concentrate on that essential ingredient which binds the community into the kingdom that God is creating among us which the citizens are seeking to live not according to the ways of the world but the ways taught by Christ. Surely if we spend more time loving our neighbor as ourselves, of seeking to understand the perspective which gives them their view of our society, then we will not find so many things to judge or so many things which make us angry...this will leave us with fewer things to avoid counting.....in other words, if we are more loving, then it will be easier to be more forgiving. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.