

Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy

BEARING WRONGS PATIENTLY

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Pain is part of the process of life. Thomas Merton writes that the biography of a human being is also a history of anguish. The way one reacts to the suffering of life matters more, in creative and human terms, than the suffering itself. We become the people we are through the disadvantages and conflicts we prefer to more comfortable alternatives.

This work of ‘mercy’ is probably the most difficult to practice. The very beginning of the Bible gives us evidence of that fact through the story of Cane and Abel. Cane’s jealousy made him incapable of bearing what he perceived as a wrong patiently. Most of us have a knee jerk reaction to people who we perceive as slighting us that catapults us into anger or deep resentment making us mentally if not physically violent. Philosophical Anthropologist, Rene Girard who spent most of his teaching career studying world literature has developed some amazing insights into the dynamics of human behavior. At the foundation of our mechanism for violence Girard identifies ‘mimicking or imitative desires’ exemplified by the typical scene of two children playing. As one child chooses a particular toy the other immediately also desires that same toy. The consequent rivalry over that toy becomes a wrong that each child identifies as one that makes him/her a victim. In the ensuing wrestling with the issues involved they seek resolution to what seems like an impossible solution in the mechanism of scapegoating. Some reason is determined to be the cause of the impasse hence the need for a scapegoat. Once the scapegoat is identified and eliminated, a temporary peace ensues that assumes the cause of the rivalry has been resolved until other imitative desires surface that generate more tensions and the cycle of conflict repeats itself. Individuals and whole societies have engaged in this process over the ownership of land, over nationalities, over racial conflicts, and over religious differences, even desiring the spouse of another and for many other reasons.

Girard, a committed Christian identifies Jesus as a scapegoat of all scapegoats. He became scapegoat in the conflict between Jewish religious leaders and the Roman Empire that resulted in Pilate and Herod putting aside their differences by making Jesus the scapegoat to their conflicts. The consequence of His suffering and death on the cross is the cause and source for all reconciliation and eternal peace among us, redeeming us from the chaos of destructive sinful conflicts.

Most of us can’t imagine that the resolution to these destructive conflicts could be achieved by exercising restraint, forgiveness, and mercy by bearing wrongs patiently. Many suggest endorsing mercy and forgiveness only enables evil. They fail to recognize that forgiveness

is not the same as passivity in the face of evil. Forgiveness is the most dramatic means of offering a counteroffensive to the world's cycle of anger and violence that says we have a right to victimize those who hurt us. When we retaliate; become resentful; seek revenge we are the ones drinking the poison of evil that we want others to die from. Only forgiveness can cauterize evil and establish justice. That is what Jesus modeled and achieved for us.

'Bearing wrongs patiently' becomes greatest opportunity for us to revolutionize the world. It is rooted in the Gospel and directly connected to the Cross. Followers of Jesus can engage in revolutionary acts by saying that cycles of violence "end with me." It throws a wrench into the cycles of conflicts and sabotages them. That is at the heart of what Jesus did from the cross. He bore His cross and did not retaliate, or hate but continued to love until His end. Only the light of love and humility can cast out darkness, hatred and pride produced by getting even.

Bearing wrongs patiently is a work of mercy that is only possible with the help and grace of Christ crucified. Jesus himself ups the ante enormously in His demand that 'we bear wrongs patiently' when in the parable of the ungrateful servant the Master canceled the entire debt of a servant who pleaded with him. "Should you not have dealt mercifully with your fellow servant?" Jesus concluded, "My heavenly Father will treat you the same way unless you forgive your brother from your heart," Matthew 18:34-35. Those words should put perspective on the many petty affronts we perceive or experience from others. In the end, the command to bear wrongs patiently is a command to be like Christ.

During this Year of Mercy Christians need to become radicalized by 'bearing wrongs patiently,' saying to the world "violence and anger end with me." By bearing wrongs and enduring its pains we deny evil the rewards of perpetuating itself. So, put the wrench of the Cross; your crosses, in the gears of evil's hateful repetitious economy by "bearing wrongs patiently!"