

September 17, 2023
Matthew 18:21-35
“The Limits of Forgiveness”
Michael Stanfield

Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven.

‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” And in anger his lord handed him over to suffer until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’

The words of God for the people of God. O Lord let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and redeemer, amen.



He was the kind of villain that we love to hate in the movies. Only, this was no movie: It was the city of Rome under Nazi rule during the Second World War. Our villain? Colonel Herman Kappler, commander of the SS forces occupying Rome. As bad guys go, he was about as bad as they come:



* Upon the occupation of Rome by the Gestapo, he demanded a multimillion dollar ransom for the lives of the Roman Jews. With the help of Pope Pius XII, the chief rabbi of Rome raised the money within 24 hours, but Kappler took the money and began herding the Jews away in cattle trucks and wagons bound for the concentration camps anyway.

* Kappler's SS routinely tortured and executed suspected members of the resistance.

* When a bomb planted by the militant communist underground killed 32 German soldiers in Rome, Kappler responded with a 10 to one reprisal. He randomly selected 320 mostly civilian prisoners for the slaughter. These 320 were made up of political prisoners as well as petty thieves and prostitutes that were being held in jail at the time. His rationale was that such a retaliation not only would send a stark message to anyone thinking about helping the resistance, he also wouldn't have to worry about feeding those 320 ever again. So, they were bound, marched through the streets of Rome, herded onto trucks and mowed down by machine gun fire in the Ardeatine Caves. Here is a stock photo of what that site looks like today.



The entrances to these caves were blown up, sealing the dead and wounded behind hundreds of tons of rock.

But for all his brutality, Kappler had not been able to capture the man who was *behind* the massive underground network that aided escaped Allied POWs and Jews in Rome. Kappler knew who the man was, but there was a problem: *He was a Vatican priest!* As long as he remained on neutral Vatican territory, Kappler was forbade by Hitler to touch him.

But this particular Irish priest was not the neutral territory type. His name? Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty.



O'Flaherty was a tall, broad-shouldered, accomplished amateur boxer who didn't run away from a fight.



Through his wit and impressive golf game he had won over many of Rome's elite and was unlikely to sit out the war and allow his contacts with the powerful in Rome to go unused. So Kappler had O'Flaherty watched, and finally, on one brilliant sunny winter morning, he finally had him cornered.



The Nazi SS had the palazzo of Prince Filippo Doria Pamphili, shown here, surrounded.



Upon orders from Kaplan, soldiers burst in.



O'Flaherty was inside.



Colonel Kappler stepped out of his black limousine to personally apprehend the troublesome priest.



O'Flaherty raced down a narrow stone staircase into the cellar – Where he discovered no way out and nowhere to hide.



The Germans were *in* the building now; he could hear them; they were yelling upstairs. They'd pull the place apart looking for him and would burst into the cellar any minute.

But too much was at stake for too many people for him to surrender to Kappler now – especially for Prince Filippo and the others upstairs who were compromised by O'Flaherty's presence. If he could somehow escape, the Nazis wouldn't be able to prove he had been there and would be forced to let the matter drop.



As he edged along the passageway that led to the cellar beneath the courtyard, he noticed a strange sound, like rocks rolling down a stone mountain-face. As he moved closer to the sound, he saw *light – daylight!* The prince's winter coal supply was sliding into a coal bin through an open trapdoor in the courtyard.

He scrambled up the pile of shifting coal and stuck his head out of the trapdoor.



Two Italian coalmen were between him and the courtyard gates where the SS troops were keeping watch for him. The coal truck was parked outside the gates.

O'Flaherty took off his black monsignor's robe and hat and put them into an empty coal sack. He tore his collarless shirt to his waist and rubbed coal dust all over himself from head to toe. With the cooperation of one of the coalmen *who had no love for the Nazis,*



O'Flaherty strolled right past the two lines of SS troops, who disdainfully gave him a broad berth so they wouldn't get their uniforms dirty.

When he was out of the soldiers' sight, he took his priestly robe and hat out of the coal sack slung over his shoulder, tucked them under his arm, and rushed to the nearest church, where he cleaned up and set off for the safety of the Vatican. After several hours, he called Prince Filippo who told O'Flaherty that everyone was safe and that Kappler was furious.



Now, only a few months earlier, this Catholic priest from neutral Ireland working in the neutral Vatican city-state during the Second World War would never have imagined being in such a predicament. He had actually grown up an Irish Republican Army sympathizer who absolutely detested the British. As a result, in the early years of the war, he had dismissed accounts of German atrocities as British and Allied propaganda.

“I read the propaganda on both sides,” he would say, “and I don’t believe much of it. I don’t think there is anything to choose between Britain and Germany.”

And so, initially, O’Flaherty’s efforts to aid escaping *Allied* POWs could just as easily have been made on behalf of escaping *German* POWs if he had been in the midst of an Allied occupation. Initially he was simply helping souls in need.



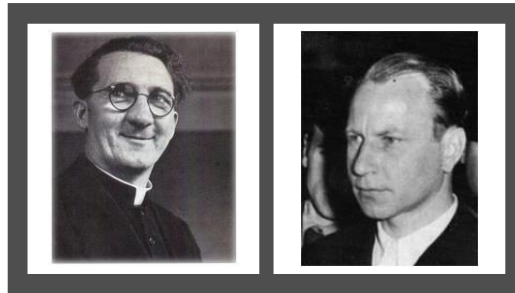
But in the winter of 1943, something happened to change O’Flaherty’s neutrality for good. While waiting for a friend at a train station in Rome, he witnessed, firsthand, Nazis using cattle prods and cattle cars to cart away Roman Jews.

The Nazis’ treatment of the Roman Jews transformed O’Flaherty, who in turn transformed his fledgling, informal network of contacts into a massive partisan effort to save as many Allied soldiers and Roman Jews as possible. He came to understand that the Nazis *had* to be defeated. As a result, this Irishman who detested the British saved more Allied lives than any other single person in World War II – and more British than any other nationality.



His efforts earned him the nickname, “the Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican,” and he was decorated, ironically, a Commander of the British Empire.

Well, Kappler and O'Flaherty played a life-and-death cat-and-mouse game in which O'Flaherty always managed to stay one step ahead of his archnemesis. In frustration, toward the end of the war, Kappler finally attempted to have the Irish priest forcibly dragged off the neutral Vatican territory and assassinated. But O'Flaherty's network got wind of the plan and arranged instead for the two Gestapo assassins to be indefinitely detained by four Swiss guards, allowing O'Flaherty to once again, escape.



The bitter rivalry between this German Nazi and this Irish priest set the stage for O'Flaherty's greatest rescue yet-to-come, years later.



After the war, Colonel Kappler was tried and convicted for war crimes. He was sentenced to life imprisonment for his part in the slaughter of the 320 at the Ardeatine Caves.

Over 75 years later, we strain to think of a villain more detestable than a Nazi war criminal who sent Jews to concentration camps and tortured and murdered innocent civilians. Imagine, then, the hatred of those who actually experienced this evil.

Many of you have expressed the sentiment that such evil is close to being unleashed again in our own country and have understandably expressed to me in one way or another your hatred of that apparent evil in some of our very own political leaders.



For others of you, perhaps your hatred of evil comes in a different form. Maybe it is your hatred for that vicious gossip at work or next door; maybe it's your hatred for the pedophile who was recently arrested and whose picture dons the latest issue of the Tribune – or maybe it's that no-good son-in-law who treats your daughter so abusively; – or maybe – maybe it's just that thoughtless driver who cut you off in traffic recently and almost made you crash your whole family into a roadside tree.

RIGHTEOUS HATRED

It's the righteous hatred we all feel when we *know* we're right, when we *know* that someone else has done something terribly wrong, when we're certain that that person owes us or our loved ones or society *something*.

Problem is, it's also the same hatred as that of the unforgiving servant of our morning text who throttles his fellow servant and has him thrown in jail declaring, "Let him rot till he's paid me back!"

Back to our story. Only one person ever visited the SS Colonel Kappler in prison. For years, almost every month, a tall, broad-shouldered figure of a man would call on the former Nazi.



It was the Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican himself, Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, this time, on a different kind of rescue mission.

More than most of us, this tough Irishman had the courage to fight evil and to seek justice at tremendous personal risk. But he also knew that we are called to love our enemies and that even villains need God's mercy.

Peter came up and asked Jesus, "Lord, when my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times?" "No," Jesus replied, "not seven times; I say, seventy times seven times".

Now, Forgiveness is not saying the offense never happened. It did.

Forgiveness is not saying that everything's okay. It most certainly is NOT.

Forgiveness is not saying we no longer feel the pain of the offense. We most definitely DO.

For Father O'Flaherty, forgiveness was saying "I still feel the pain, but I am want to let go of *your* involvement in my pain."

For Father O'Flaherty, forgiveness was an attitude shift whereby he was able to turn over to God the business of how the other guy is doing.

For Father O'Flaherty, forgiveness was saying to Kappler, "You know what, I'm pretty okay now, and I am willing to let God deal with whether you are okay, and I am willing to let go of my need to be the instrument of correction and rebuke in your life."



In fact, Father O'Flaherty continued to visit Kappler and show him the love of Christ. And finally, in March 1959, Herman Kappler, former SS colonel, Nazi war criminal, sought forgiveness and salvation in the waters of baptism poured out by the hand of Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty himself.

When there are those in power who abuse that power, we are called upon to use every skill, every contact, every resource we have at our disposal to oppose that power and the evil that is wrought through it.

Often that means forcibly removing one from power and putting that one in a place like prison where that one can no longer harm another soul. But what then? Then the rest is up to God. Our job from that point is to seek to forgive.

And seek is all we can do.



**Step 1: I want
to Forgive**

The first step is the hardest. It is to want to forgive. Evil acts that cause trauma to the body and mind must be sufficiently addressed. One's safety and sense of self both must be on solid ground again. My experience with forgiveness of evil action, mainly as a therapist, is that it is not something one can simply will oneself into – not with any real authenticity. And in cases of trauma, trying to force oneself to forgive out of one's sense of Christian duty, might not even be healthy, at least not at first – and especially if trauma is involved.



**Step 2: Some sense
of Justice. The Evil
has stopped.**

It is why justice is also a crucial and important step – the evil has to have been stopped. This is an absolute. Evil acts that are allowed to continue unabated are nearly impossible to forgive. I say “nearly impossible” because we know that Jesus forgave the evil acts of those still crucifying him on the cross. But the normal human course of events, as our story shows, is that the evil, destructive acts are first stopped. The perpetrators are made to face justice and/or are facing the consequences of their behavior.



**Step 3: The Evil
has been owned
by the perpetrator.**

Now it helps tremendously if the evil has been owned by the perpetrator – that is they have taken full responsibility for what they have done. But, where forgiveness is concerned, this is not an absolute – a big impediment to forgiveness, if not done, yes, but not an absolute. Without this, a future relationship of any substance will be impossible. But forgiveness can still happen.

I have seen Forgiveness come by way of pity, that is recognizing the sad state of the humanity of the perpetrator, as miserable – as one perhaps finally incapable of real, authentic, human connection.

But once a perpetrator of evil action has been stopped and has had to face the consequences of his/her actions, one's ultimate healing as the recipient of those evil acts, will rest upon a desire,

with all of one's might, *to* forgive. That is our part: *to try* and forgive; and perhaps it might help to know that forgiveness, *true* forgiveness, is finally something that, through grace, dawns on one – that, in a sense, happens *to* one. It comes to one like a great gift, it then lightens one; it frees one and so makes forgiveness more a part of who one is, rather than some *thing* one is required to do.



And so, it is there, through having been hurt by the evil actions of another, that that God-given spirit of forgiveness ironically is found. It is so that we can be freed and gifted with something we didn't have before, so that like Father O'Flaherty, even us fighters, can hopefully find the ability, to bring that other, with us, back to the healing waters of baptism.

Let us pray. Ever loving God, we come from a world that uses your name as a curse word. Men and women, claiming to follow your way, hate and kill each other because of differences of creed, nationality, race and sexual identity or they whole-heartedly support leaders who seem bent on doing just that. Even in our homes and church we find fault with each other and bear grudges. Lead us away from our feelings of self-righteousness and self-concern. Give us the capacity, like Father O'Flaherty and like your son *both* to stand against the injustices caused by evil *and* to forgive those who perpetrate that evil, once they are no longer a threat –either to our safety or to the safety of others. Amen.

*The story of Kappler and O'Flaherty comes from the Sept 12, 1999 issue of Homiletics Magazine.