

Pastor's Corner – July, 2011 - Forgiveness

Summer is a time when we are invited to relax, to renew ourselves physically. But it is also a time when we are invited to take time out, time out from that over-business which has crept into our lives; time out from that computer, that cell phone and ipod in order to nourish our spiritual hunger, in order to find a better balance in our lives. That doesn't mean that we need pick up one more spiritual book; after all we are over-saturated with so-called spiritual books which do not really bring much clarity. I suggest that it is better to go back to one or two good books and re-meditate on their contents. I believe an author like Ron Rolheiser can help us do that, for example in his book "The Holy Longing". You know Rolheiser has a column which is published in some 60 newspapers. The June 8 issue of the Prairie Messenger has his article "simplifying our spiritual vocabulary to just three words." Here is an excerpt.

"Somewhere near his 75th birthday, Morris West wrote a series of autobiographical essays entitled, A View from the Ridge. In the Prologue of that book he suggests that at age 75 you need to have only one word left in your spiritual vocabulary, gratitude, and that maturity is attained precisely at that moment when gratitude begins to drown out and cauterize the hurts in your life. As he describes it: Life has served me as it serves everyone, sometimes well and sometimes ill, but I have learned to be grateful for the gifts of it, for the love that began it and the other loves with which I have been so richly endowed. I agree with West, though it necessary to add that the fruit of that maturity is forgiveness. Just as smoke follows fire, forgiveness follows gratitude. Gratitude ultimately undergirds and fuels all genuine virtue, is the real basis of holiness, and the source of love itself. And its major fruit is forgiveness. When we are grateful we more easily find the strength to forgive. **Moreover, just as gratitude undergirds genuine virtue, forgiveness undergirds genuine religion and morality. Thus, as we get older, we can trim our spiritual vocabulary down to three words: Forgive, forgive, forgive!** To age into and then die with a forgiving heart is the ultimate moral and religious imperative. ... **All the dogmatic and moral purity in the world does little for us if our hearts are bitter and incapable of forgiveness.**

We see this, for instance, in the sad figure of the older brother of the prodigal son. He stands before his father protesting that he has never wandered, never been unfaithful, and that he has stayed home and done the family's work. But, and this is the issue, he stands outside the father's house, unable to enter into joy, celebration, the banquet, the dance. He's done everything right, but a bitter heart prevents him from entering the father's house just as much as the lustful wanderings of his younger brother took him out of that same house. **Religious and moral fidelity, when not rooted inside of gratitude and forgiveness, are far from enough. They can leave us just as much outside the father's house as sin and infidelity.** As Jesus teaches forcefully in the Lord's Prayer, a non-negotiable condition for going to heaven is forgiveness, especially our forgiving those who have hurt us. But the struggle to forgive others is not easy and may never be trivialized or preached lightly. The struggle to forgive, I suspect, is our greatest psychological, moral, and religious struggle. It's not easy to forgive. Most everything inside of us protests. When we have been wronged, when we have suffered an injustice, when someone or something has treated us unfairly, a thousand physical and psychological mechanisms inside of us begin to clam-up, shut-down, freeze-over, self-protect, and scream-out in protest, anger, and rage. Forgiveness is not something we can simply will and make happen. The heart, as Pascal once said, has its reasons. It also has its rhythms, its paranoia, its cold bitter spots, and its need to seal itself off from whatever has wounded it. ... So much of the lightness or heaviness in our hearts, most every nuance of our mood, is unconsciously dictated by either the forgiveness or the non-forgiveness inside us. **Forgiveness is the deep secret to joy. It is also the ultimate imperative.**

Je Rolheiser, OP