

Forgiveness in a World of Conflict

Advent Recollection

James W. Stroud, December 10, 2024

A voice of one crying out in the desert:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths....”

Gospel from the Second Sunday of Advent, Cycle C - Luke 3:4 quoting Isaiah 40:3

Outline

A World of Conflict: Society's Inhumanity

Rediscovering Our Humanity through Love's Forgiveness

What is Forgiveness?

Practicing Forgiveness in (and out of) the Season of Advent

A World of Conflict: Society's Inhumanity

Torrent of Hate for Health Insurance Industry Follows C.E.O.'s Killing

The shooting death of a UnitedHealthcare executive in Manhattan has unleashed Americans' frustrations with an industry that often denies coverage and reimbursement for medical claims.

Headline of NY Times story on Dec. 5, 2024 by Dionne Searcey and Madison Malone Kircher

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/05/nyregion/social-media-insurance-industry-brian-thompson.html>

“A DEFINING FEATURE OF LIFE in the modern West is our awareness of society’s inhumanity and our inability to imagine a way out of it. This inhumanity includes everything from abortions, mass shootings, and widespread coverups of sexual abuse to meaningless jobs, broken communities, and TV shows that are only good for numbing our anxiety for thirty minutes.”

Alan Noble. *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (p. 1). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

What is at the core of this inhumanity?

“We are each our own,
We belong to ourselves.”

Alan Noble. *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (p. 3). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

“To be your own and belong to yourself means that the most fundamental truth about existence is that you are responsible for your existence and everything it entails. I am responsible for living a life of purpose, of defining my identity, of interpreting meaningful events, of choosing my values, and electing where I belong. If I belong to myself, then I am the only one who can set limits on who I am or what I can do. No one else has the right to define me, to choose my journey in life, or to assure me that I am okay. I belong to myself.”

Alan Noble. *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (pp. 3-4). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

How often is my goal for the
day survival?

Inhumanity

Death entering the world

- Cain and Abel from the Book of Genesis
- “Am I my brother’s keeper?”
Gen 4:9

By Jan van Eyck/ Hubert van Eyck Ghent Altarpiece,
Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=691754>



“For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another, unlike Cain who belonged to the evil one and slaughtered his brother.”

1 John 3:11-12

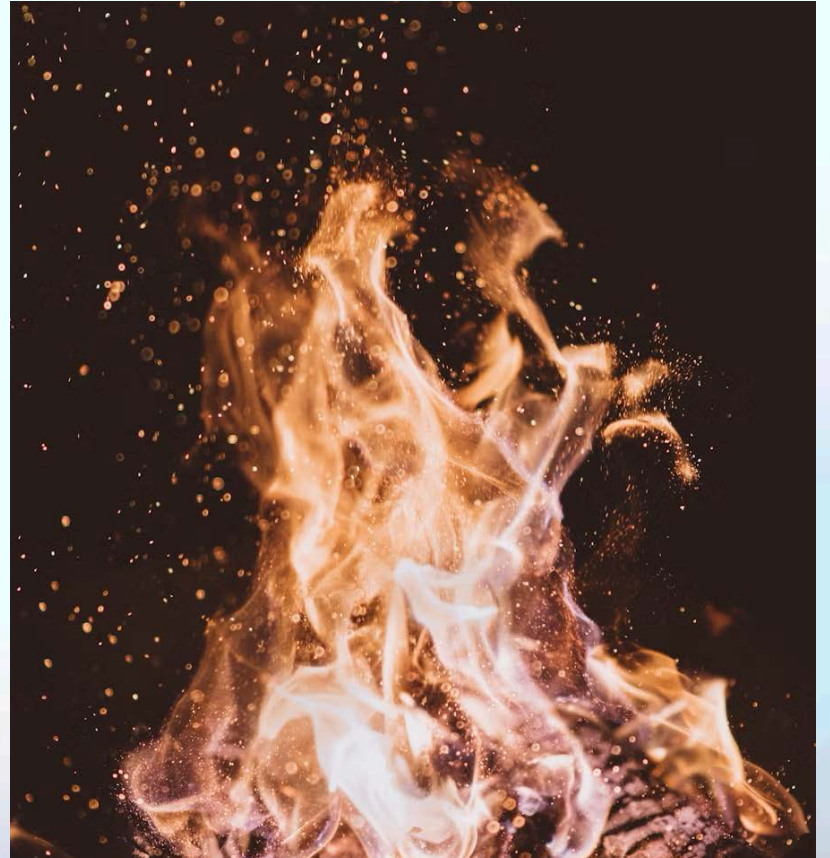
2. Rediscovering Our Humanity through Love's Forgiveness

Step One: We are not our own.

First Reading from the Book of the Prophet Baruch

Bar 5:9 - Second Sunday of Advent Cycle C

“[F]or God is leading Israel in joy by the light of his glory, with his mercy and justice for company.”



Step Two:

“Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown
mercy.”

Gospel of Matthew 5:7

Then Peter approaching asked him, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.”

Matthew 18:21-22

If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you.

But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.

Matthew 6:14-15 following the Lord's Prayer



Forgiveness as Divine and Human

“Above all, let your love for one another be intense, because love covers a multitude of sins.”

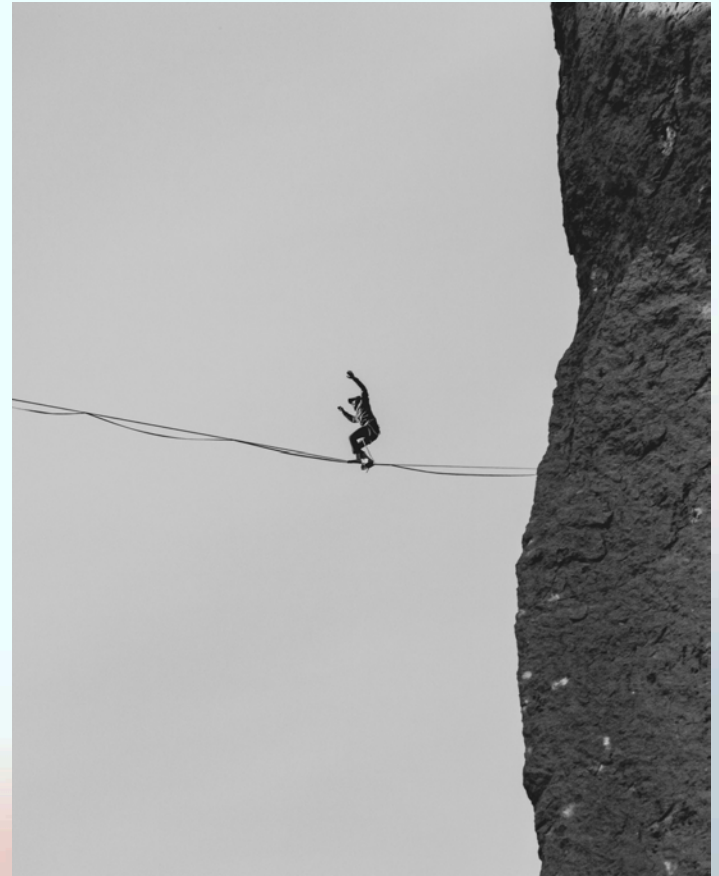
1 Peter 4:8

3. What is Forgiveness?

Difficulty of Defining Forgiveness

- Is it a speech act or a psychological process?
- Is it about renouncing negative emotions?
- Is it about condoning or excusing negative behavior?
- Should it be conditional or unconditional?
- Who has the standing to forgive?
- Does it lead to reconciliation?
- Is it a work of love? If so, how?

A caution
about
idealizing
forgiveness



Sean Benesh, <https://unsplash.com/photos/black-bird-on-black-wire-during-daytime-vfJPtNFGfVs>

Good Enough Forgiveness

- Doesn't require the extinguishing of all resentment or emotional feelings
- Does require no longer being held in bondage by these emotions

Love's (Vision of) Forgiveness

- Rooted in love of neighbor which itself is rooted in love of God
 - With a focus on close attention, empathy, and generosity
 - To seeing the good in the other - not simply as wrong-doers because all are loved by God
 - Includes friends and non-friends
 - With hopefulness in love's transformative power
 - Both to reform the offender and to reform our ability to forgive

Dead Man Walking by Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ

- Befriending Elmo Patrick Sonnier through letter writing
- Sr. Prejean experiences concern/revulsion at the crimes of Sonnier (with his younger brother he committed a double murder / sexual assault of a young woman); also has concern for the victims of Sonnier.
- “The victims are dead and the killer is alive and I am befriending the killer.” Sr. Helen Prejean. *Dead Man Walking: The Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty That Sparked a National Debate* (p. 38). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.
- And yet she is drawn to write to him and eventually visit with him and be his spiritual advisor: “The sheer weight of his loneliness, his abandonment, draws me. I abhor the evil he has done. But I sense something, some sheer and essential humanness, and that, perhaps, is what draws me most of all.” Sr. Helen Prejean. *Dead Man Walking* (p. 40). Kindle Edition.

Practicing Forgiveness in (and out of) the Season of Advent

Begin practicing forgiveness in smaller things and closer situations

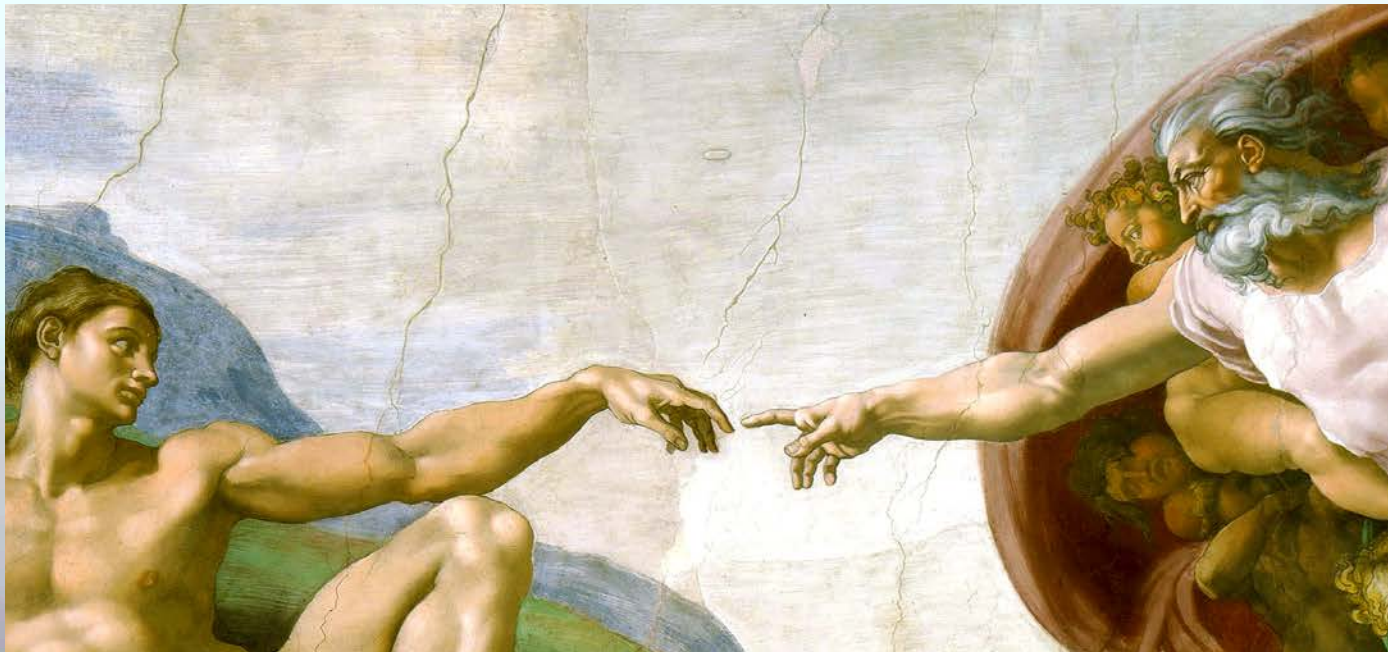
*Reflect on what it means to love
your neighbor as yourself*

Realize that loving your neighbor is a choice and not necessarily a feeling

“Act as if you did. Do not sit trying to manufacture feelings. Ask yourself, ‘If I were sure that I loved God, what would I do?’ When you have found the answer, go and do it.”

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* p. 132

*Remember that forgiveness is a
divine and human activity*



“The work of forgiveness and mercy is costly. Its success depends chiefly on the grace of God, which alone can convert hearts. It also depends on others.... Through forgiveness we give to God and to others the best of ourselves, dearly acquired at the price of our rebellious self-love, and we leave them to draw profit from it, knowing that we shall not always see the results and that our kindness may even be abused.”

Servais Pinckaers, *The Pursuit of Happiness - God's Way: Living the Beatitudes*, p. 120.

“The beauty of forgiveness is that it allows you to add goodness to your story even when others are intent on polluting your very being with injustices, whether by words, actions, or failures to say or act when they should. Love empowers, and because forgiveness is a variant of love, it too empowers those who are treated unfairly.”

Robert Enright, *The Forgiving Life*, p. 15.

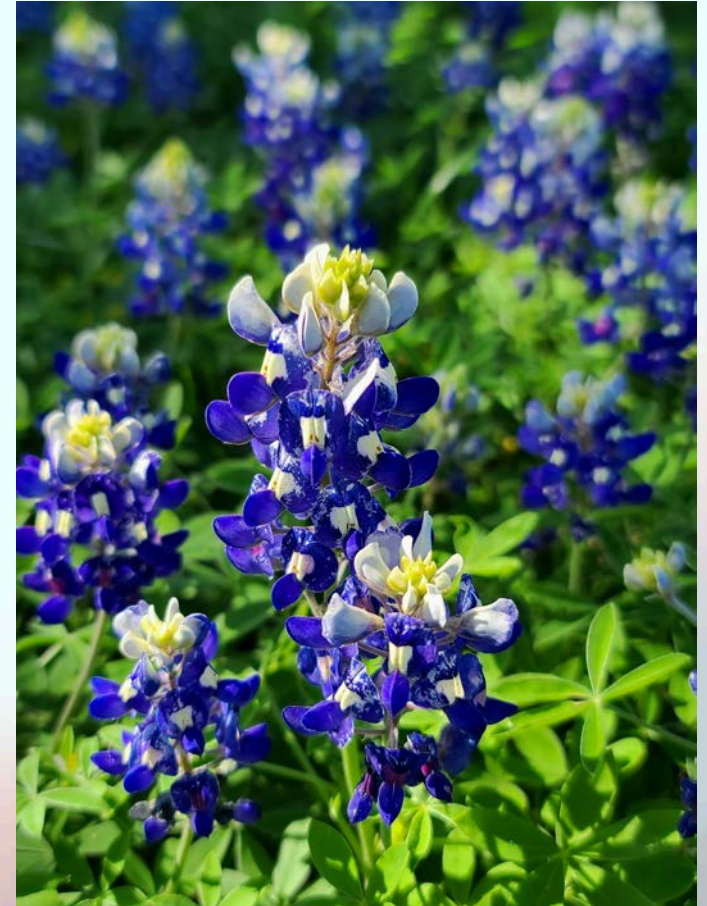


Photo by Pete Alexopoulos on Unsplash

Resources for further reading

- Robert Enright, *The Forgiving Life: A Pathway to Overcoming Resentment and Creating a Legacy of Love* (American Philosophical Association, 2014)
- C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* Book 3 Sections 7 and 9
- Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (InterVarsity Press).
- “The Quality of Mercy,” in Servais Pinckaers, *The Pursuit of Happiness - God’s Way: Living the Beatitudes*