

The Impossible Possibility of Forgiveness

Walter Brueggemann
Cincinnati, Ohio

Here are three questions a preacher might ponder concerning the opportunity to preach the good news of forgiveness. They are, I submit, not simply questions for preachers; they are questions that can be articulated for and pondered by church folks, for the proclamation and experience of forgiveness do not amount to an instantaneous happening for most of us, but belong in the flow of the narrative life of each of us. For that reason forgiveness as a theological possibility needs to be framed in intelligible and critical ways. In what follows I will suggest how each of these questions is processed and resolved in Old Testament texts.

I. What Makes Forgiveness Impossible?

“The Hate Must Stop Somewhere” (The Railroad Man)¹

Forgiveness remains impossible when life is parsed in the mode of “deeds-consequences,” when it is thought and experienced that deeds have an unbreakable, tight, predictable connection to consequences that arise from them. While this mode of thinking can be imagined positively, that good deeds evoke blessings, most often this assumption is understood and accented negatively, that bad deeds inevitably and inescapably produce negative consequences, whether by automatic results (smoking causes cancer) or by punishing authorities that guarantee moral order (three strikes and you are out). Because the calculus of deeds and consequences cannot be broken or violated, forgiveness is impossible. One must live with the consequences of one’s deeds...to perpetuity!

This notion of “deeds-consequences” is pervasive in the Old Testament (and reflected in the probe of John 9:2):²

First, it is the theological assumption of the theology of Deuteronomy, the dominant theology of the Old Testament. Obedience to the commandments yields well-being; disobedience yields covenant curses (see Deut 28:1-68).

See I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord our God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your hearts turn away and you do not hear (obey), but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. (Deut. 30:15-18)

The disproportionate accent on curses in chapter 28 indicates that the force of this double “if-then” arrangement is on the negative.

Second, this same “deeds-consequences” construct is the structural assumption of the recurring prophetic speeches of judgment that regularly consist in an *indictment* of Torah disobedience and a *sentence* that follows from old covenant curses.³ The

two are characteristically connected by a “therefore” that allows for both automatic outcomes and divine agency:

Hear the word of the Lord,
O people of Israel;
For the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
and no knowledge of God in the land.
Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.
Therefore the land mourns,
And all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals,
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing. (Hosea 4:1-3)

Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;
Yet they lean on the Lord and say,
“Surely the Lord is with us!
No harm shall come on us.”
Therefore because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
And the mountain of the house a wooded height. (Micah 3:11-12)

The prophets, reflective of the tradition of Deuteronomy, assume a close connection between deeds and consequences, between covenantal disobedience and covenantal curse. The “divine therefore” permits connections to be made that might otherwise elude us.

Third, the same connection of deeds and consequences is the tacit assumption of the wisdom teaching in the book of Proverbs:⁴

A slack hand causes poverty,
but the hand of the diligent makes rich (Proverbs 10:4).
The wage of the righteous leads to life,
the gain of the wicked to sin (v. 16).
The fear of the Lord prolongs life,
but the years of the wicked will be short (v. 27).
The righteous will never be moved,
but the wicked will not remain in the land. (v. 30)

It is the assumption of both Job and his friends and the governing subject of the dispute between them. The God of the whirlwind is not interested in such a calculus, but it nonetheless dominates the book of Job as an heir to the book of Proverbs.

Thus the *Deuteronomic*, *prophetic*, and *sapiential* traditions all agree on this basic assumption. That assumption, on the one hand, operates as *social control* to motivate people to “get it right.” On the other hand, it serves to assure a *moral coherence* to reality, so that one’s actions are important and are significant in shaping the future: “What you sow, you reap!” This same assumption is pervasive in popular religion and in civic life among us:

First, it is the basis of much *right-wing religion* that preaches “hell, fire, and damnation” that frightens people into a “moral life.” Wrong living will evoke long-term punishment that is inescapable. It is astonishing to notice that many who have long since left such religion continue to host such assumptions.

Second, that same assumption has been transposed in powerful ways from religion to *market ideology*, so that obedience to the mandates of the market brings economic preference; those who do not produce endlessly may be left behind with unforgivable, intractable debt. Those who do not shop and consume continually, moreover, are “letting down our side.” The pressure of getting kids into the right preschool and building kids’ “dossiers” with soccer and dance lessons is all a part of the “deeds-consequences” pressure of the market. If one does not “perform” adequately, one will surely “suffer the consequences.”

Third, I dare imagine that the same pressure, less closely articulated, permeates good citizenship among *good liberals* who perform their duty in generous engaged civic ways, because some liberals are quite like Job; we do not “serve God for naught” (Job 1:9). Indeed I could imagine that the same unspoken assumption operates with some duty-propelled liberal pastors who must endlessly “prove themselves” and even seminary teachers who must endlessly produce one more published article!

The assumption behind these performance-based forms of faith is that God’s world is organized in an inexorable way that yields rewards and punishments. It is this assumption that interpreted the major crisis of the Old Testament, the destruction of Jerusalem as divine punishment for long-term disobedience to Torah. The long telling of royal history in the Books of Kings concerns the demise and failure of Jerusalem, its monarchy and temple, that effectively ended the history of Israel in the exile with its shame, deportation, and displacement (see II Kings 24:13-25:21; Jeremiah 52:12-30). The long prayer of Ezra (Nehemiah 9:6-37) and the long recital of Psalm 106 attest to this long term failure.

Fourth, I suggest that in contemporary popular culture, the defining anthem of this theology is “Santa Claus is Coming to Town”:

He’s gonna find out
Who’s naughty and nice....
He knows if you’ve been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake!

In teasing good humor the song is in fact a form of social control with the prospect of “coal” for poor performances that are never forgiven. This applies not only to “our kids” but to many adults as well!

II. *What Makes Forgiveness Possible?*

“Without sundering, there is no reconciliation” (James Joyce).⁵

According to the theology of “deeds-consequences,” the history of Israel would properly have come to an end in the destruction of Jerusalem. That “end” is voiced in the grief of the Book of Lamentations:

The roads to Zion mourn;
For no one comes to the festivals;
All her gates are desolate,
Her priests groan;
Her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter.
...because the Lord has made her suffer
For the multitude of her transgressions...
so I say, “Gone is my glory,
and all that I had hoped for from the Lord.” (Lamentations 1: 4-5; 3:18)

Hope is gone! Deeds have received consequences. Disobedience has evoked covenant curses. Fini! No forgiveness! No possible future!

The wonder of the Old Testament, of Judaism, and consequently of Christian faith is that this turns out not to be the end. There is a continuation that is grounded in forgiveness. So the poet in Lamentations can continue:

But this I call to mind,
And therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
His mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning,
Great is your faithfulness. (3:21-23)

Continuation is grounded in divine steadfast love, faithfulness, and mercy, the “big three” of covenantal possibility.

What makes forgiveness possible is the astonishing readiness of God to reach beyond deeds-consequences, to restore and sustain the relationship that had by all proper measure been terminated in disobedience. It is this inexplicable reach of God beyond “deeds-consequences” that makes forgiveness possible. We may see this in two texts that are likely pre-exilic. In Exodus 34, after the Golden Calf incident and the hard negotiations on the part of Moses, Moses utters a final, desperate petition to YHWH: “Although this is a stiff-necked people pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance” (34:9).

The answer to the prayer is not certain, which is why the prayer is an act of risky hope. The divine answer, however, opens the future:

I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels,
such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all
the people among whom you live shall see the work of the Lord; for it is
an awesome thing that I will do with you. (v. 10)

God has moved beyond the indignation over the Golden Calf to generate a new future based in forgiveness.

In Hosea 11:5-7, YHWH is in a rant against recalcitrant Israel. But then, in mid-rant, YHWH interrupts YHWH's own speech with self-questioning wonderment:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim? (Hosea 11:8)

YHWH comes in that instant to realize that YHWH has no inclination to enact fierce anger, but turns the rant into a reach of compassion:

My heart recoils within me;
My compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
For I am God and no mortal,
The Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath. (vv. 8b-9)

That divine reach is inexplicable, but it is the indispensable act of God that makes new life possible for Israel.

It is in the exile, when "deeds consequences" reached its completion in punishment and all hope is lost, that there is a surge of divine forgiveness for Israel grounded in God's reach to generate newness.

First, in the tradition of Isaiah, we have had a long condemnation of society in a series of "woes" (Isaiah 5:8-24). But now, at the end of II Isaiah, the poet has God make a bid for restoration:

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
Call upon him while he is near....
Let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6-7)

The operational word is *pardon*. That God's ways are "higher" may mean, in context, that they supersede "deeds-consequences" in order to make new life possible. What follows in verses 12-13 is an imagined, unexpected glorious procession home, made possible by the God who has broken the tired, killing grip of deeds-consequences.

Second, the tradition of Jeremiah has at length castigated Jerusalem and arrived in 19:11 at the harsh ultimate judgment: "So I will break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended." The phrase "cannot be mended," "cannot be healed" puts Jerusalem beyond restitution. And yet, when we reach "The Book of Comfort" in Jeremiah 30-31, there is "grace in the wilderness" (31:2), an "everlasting love" (31:3) that culminates in new covenant (31:31-34). That famous passage ends: "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (31:34). "Deeds-consequences" causes us to remember our failure longer than God remembers. Newness in Israel is grounded in YHWH's readiness to break the cycle of disobedience-punishment with a generous act of forgiveness whereby old calcula-

tions about consequences are removed from reckoning. The assertion of forgiveness is reiterated by the prophet in 33:7-8: "I will restore the fortunes of Judah, and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them of all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me" (33:7-8).

Third, the prophet Ezekiel, in one of his best known passages, hews to the line of deed-consequences:

If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right... follows my statutes and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully—such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the Lord God... But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live, they shall not die. (18:5, 9, 21)

Later on, however, Ezekiel must have concluded that such a "turn" is not possible. In 36:24-27, in a torrent of unconditional divine promises, Israel will be transformed by YHWH's reach for new beginnings:

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

It is spectacularly the case that all three "major prophets" have God moved from "deeds-consequences" that issues in punishment to a fresh reach beyond to new possibility. That of course is the point of possibility. I do not think, however, that point has force unless and until we are clear about the weight of "deeds-consequences" in our lives. It is precisely in the hopeless outcome of "deeds-consequences" that generates fear, self-hatred, and endless pressure that the divine reach of compassion and forgetfulness has transformative power as it did for ancient Israel. This means that God

reaches beyond hell, fire, and damnation to create new life;

reaches beyond self-hatred and shame with tender mercy that vetoes such hatred;

reaches beyond the defeats and hopeless pressures to "catch-up" in the market economy to validate those "left behind";

reaches to the pressure of liberals with their endless commitments to enter into an unbelievable sabbath rest.

It is not easy for those of us inured to "deeds consequences" to accept such a reach. I think, however, that the preachable point is that such a reach is not easy for God either. God, so the tradition attests is, like us, inured to "deeds consequences" and to acute self-regard that will not be mocked by casual defiance or prideful recalcitrance. Forgiveness, as we may imagine, requires nothing less than God's capacity to

resituate God's own life outside the orbit of deeds-consequences. It is for that reason, I judge, that it is exactly in the exile that we begin to get new maternal images for God. God must move in new ways if the lethal cycle of deeds-consequences is to be nullified. As a result, the congregation might be led to consider how forgiveness has been experienced, and who has been able to step outside "deeds-consequences" to allow for the slippage that makes new life possible.

Since we pray "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us," we might be invited to consider how we ourselves might step outside "deeds-consequences" for the sake of forgiveness. If as James Joyce asserts, "There is no reconciliation without sundering," we may ask, "What must be sundered?" And the answer is that God's way of governing needed to be sundered. And so with us, what must be sundered is our self-concept, our self-presentation, our old habits of holding grudges and keeping score and harboring long term resentments.

After the phrasing of the prayer, it is likely that we cannot *receive* forgiveness unless we are in something of a posture of *enacting* forgiveness. That is, we cannot entertain God's reach beyond "deeds consequences" unless we ourselves are alive to the possibility of such a reach beyond. All of our conventional habits of grudge preservation are called to account. Such a sundering may variously pertain to:

- long held familial alienations,
- old habits of quarreling in the congregation,
- old party conversations that regularly excommunicate "red" or "blue" folks in the community.
- old stereotypes of race, gender, class,
- old resentment of the "undeserving poor,"
- old caricatures of those "not like us," for example Jews or Muslims.

The history of life beyond "cannot be mended" is the story of the reach that requires sundering.

III. *What Does Forgiveness Make Possible?*

"When I develop a mindset of forgiveness, rather than a mindset of grievance, I don't just forgive a particular act; I become a more forgiving person.

With a grievance mindset, I look at the world and see what is wrong. When I have a forgiveness mindset, I start to see the world not through grievance but through Gratitude." (Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu)⁶

The ancient "assurance of pardon" anticipated that one forgiven would be able to lead a "godly, righteous, and sober life," that is, a life in sync with the God who forgives. I suggest that the text, beyond such rhetoric, affirms that one forgiven can do anything that one might want to do that is congruent with the reality of forgiveness and with the one who forgives. Forgiveness is an emancipation from the fear, shame, guilt, and self-hatred to a new freedom:

- It is a break beyond hell, fire, and damnation to be one's true self;
- It is a break beyond the claims of market productivity to be rather than to do;
- It is a break beyond liberal "duty" to bask in a truly accepted, acceptable life.

Forgiveness is an emancipation that lifts all the weight of "deeds consequences" and invites to "lightness of being." A genuinely forgiven person is one who is deeply and gladly attached to the forgiver, not "indebted" but grateful.

In the Old Testament prophets, what comes from forgiveness is the capacity to

imagine, host, and perform concrete and specific newnesses that are impossible except for forgiveness. The preacher thus may ponder that what follows from forgiveness is “that all things are possible.”

First, in the book of Isaiah, II Isaiah ends, as noted, with promised pardon (55:6-9) and joyous homecoming (vv. 12-13). After that, what follows in the book of Isaiah is a reimagined society that is now possible. In chapter 56 we have imagined inclusiveness for those most eagerly excluded, eunuchs, and foreigners. The new prospect is that “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (56:7).

In chapter 58, a new social fabric is proposed that will make possible a common good shared between haves and have-nots:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see them naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourselves from your own kin? (58:6-7)

Most especially, in anticipation of “I have a Dream,” 65:17-25 can hold in purview a new Jerusalem, new urban ordering of social power in which they “will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,” i. e., in Jerusalem. An unforgiven urban economy will systematically hurt and will programmatically destroy. But not now! Because urban newness is possible!

Second, the book of Jeremiah is rooted in the old Torah memory of Sinai via the tradition of Deuteronomy. When Jeremiah comes to imagine what is possible via forgiveness, he imagines a new covenant in which there will be glad acceptance of Torah commandments, not as coercion, but as a body of teaching that will bring life. The anticipation of a new covenant is a marvel because Jeremiah can recall broken covenant, a brokenness that recurs but that reaches back all the way to broken covenant caused by the Golden Calf (Jeremiah 11:10). But because of forgiveness, restored covenant is possible, and with it a covenantal community and a covenantal ordering of social power. Implicit in “new covenant” is a new neighborly economy that specializes in forgiveness of debts, not a bad thing to think about as public policy in a society that leaves students with unbearable debts and that generates and accepts as normal a permanent underclass.

Third, Ezekiel by contrast is rooted in the priestly tradition reflected in the book of Leviticus that is preoccupied with holiness. He has earlier imagined the departure of God’s glory from Jerusalem and its temple because God could not remain in a place of profanation (Ezekiel 9-10). Ezekiel imagines that in time to come there will be a new temple (Ezekiel 40-48). YHWH will return in glory to reside permanently in the new temple. This act of prophetic imagination is counter to all the facts on the ground of Israel’s failed holiness. Ezekiel’s temple is not primarily about architecture. It is about the readiness of God to be with God’s people and to invest their common life with holiness. It is forgiveness that makes the divine presence possible in Israel.

This God who will come in glory will, in time to come, be shepherd of Israel:

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. (34:15-16)

It is worth considering this vision of a new temple and a new sense of divine presence in a society like ours. It is remarkable to think that that glory has indeed departed from among us (thus the collapse of US exceptionalism) precisely because profanation is emphatic in our society...the trivializing of common life and the reduction of everything and everyone to a commodity. But now, forgiven, new temple and new presence!

IV. Conclusion

It is useful, I think, to give narrative body to the crisis of forgiveness. Thus the sequence I propose in the Old Testament is:

1. The symmetry of “deeds-consequences”;
2. The reach beyond “deeds consequences” symmetry in generosity that sunders old patterns and old assumptions; and
3. Lightness of being that makes all things possible.

It will occur to some readers familiar with my work that this sequence is yet another articulation of my typology in the book of Psalms of “orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.”⁷ Of course the “old orientation” of “deeds-consequences” is on all counts powerful among us and will continue to be so. It is, I propose, a disorientation in God’s own life with the emergence of pathos-filled solidarity that causes a genuine break in old patterns of governance. The performance that that solidarity makes all things new, a possibility never possible under the aegis of “deeds-consequences.”

I am of course aware that this dramatic sequence is acted out many times in the narratives that cluster around Jesus. It is reflected, moreover, in the most normative “three point sermon” of sin-salvation-new life, the original classic form of the three point sermon, always the same three points. Except that in the sequence that I have traced, the first accent is not explicitly on “sin.” It concerns, rather, the theological-moral assumption of “deeds-consequences” that produces a graceless world. This dramatic sequence is not only definitional for the narrative of Jesus and in the faith of ancient Israel for the destiny of Jerusalem. The same drama is many times performed in the life of a congregation. I hazard that many people come to church along with the assumptions of “deeds consequences.” The best hope (and fear!) is that the claim of “deeds-consequences” will be broken, hope because we yearn for reconciliation, fear because such a break signifies the eclipse of an old order of certitude. The reach beyond such certitude feels to some like a plunge into unbearable relativism.

Thus three questions arise:

1. *What makes forgiveness impossible?* It is the grip of “deeds consequences” that allows no “out.”
2. *What makes forgiveness possible?* It is the inexplicable reach of generous graciousness beyond “deeds-consequences.”
3. *What does forgiveness make possible?* Everything congruent with the forgiver.

These are questions that belong primarily (not exclusively) to the Gospel community. What a way to imagine the church, a community that is preoccupied with these questions (and answers) that eventually concern both our personal destiny and our social, communal possibility! I suggest that preaching forgiveness is not simply a declaration of God's love, but it is a close attentiveness to costly sundering that makes new life possible. It is a wonder to imagine God's readiness to be sundered for the sake of newness. It is an equal wonder to consider our readiness for such a break in our way of being present in the world.

My title, "Impossible Possibility" is a play on the phrasing of Kierkegaard. The phrase is exactly to the point. We know in our habitual practices about the stubborn impossibility of forgiveness. We only rarely experience the way in which the impossibility of forgiveness becomes possible. But that is the primal truth of our faith. God turns that impossibility to possibility, and from that possibility all other things become possible. This is a truth that our society little suspects. But we know better. We constitute a body that is resolved to receive and embrace this truth, along with the freedom and courage for the "reach beyond" that comes with sundering.

Notes

1. The phrase is from the film; I have not read the book.
2. The classic statement is by Klaus Koch, "Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?" *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. James L. Crenshaw (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 57-87.
3. See Patrick D. Miller, *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets: A Stylistic and Theological Analysis* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982).
4. See Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 124-137.
5. Joyce is quoted by Richard Kearney, *Anatheism [Returning to God after God]* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Kearney gives no specific citation.
6. Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (New York: Harper One, 2014), 218.
7. Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms & the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 3-32.