Dose of forgiveness: Isaiah 43:18-25; Psalm 41; Mark 2:1-12

by Debra Farrington in the February 7, 2006 issue

In the play *A Thousand Clowns*, by Herb Gardner, a character named Murray discovers that he can offer a simple apology to almost anyone—even a complete stranger—and he or she will forgive him. He stands on the corner of 51st and Lexington in New York City one day, telling those who walk by him, "I'm sorry," and in almost every instance, he's forgiven on the spot. "That's the most you can expect from life," he muses, "a really good apology for all the things you won't get."

I hope that's not true. I wonder, though, what would have happened if Murray had stood on the street corner telling passers-by that he forgave *them*. The responses probably wouldn't have been so warm; some might have brought on downright hostility. Though most of us can readily imagine that we're owed an apology for something (and perhaps lots of somethings), admitting that we've done anything that requires forgiveness comes less easily.

How did the paralyzed man feel, for instance, when Jesus said, "Son, your sins are forgiven"? Did he wonder what his sins were? Did he feel defensive? Or search his memory for the particular sin that might have been bad enough to result in paralysis? Was he simply outraged? We don't know. Mark tells us nothing about this man or his response to Jesus, but is there anyone who doesn't need God's forgiveness, who doesn't need to be reminded that God has already forgiven us, no matter what?

Perhaps the man with the paralysis felt like those who were listening to God in the passage from Isaiah. God, speaking in Isaiah of all the new things that are about to spring forth, gets a lukewarm response. In words reminiscent of Exodus, God invites the people to go out into the wilderness again—though without the endless thirst of the Israelites who left Egypt—and it seems the people ignore the invitation, or at least put off accepting it outright. They don't bother to bring God their offerings of thanks; they just keep sinning. And yet God not only forgives them, but vows not to

remember their sins. What are we to make of a God who indiscriminately forgives our sins?

For me these two stories highlight everything about forgiveness that I find challenging. First, there's the Santa Claus problem: God knows already if we've been naughty or nice. I hate that. Like Cain I want to conceal my sins from God.

And then there's that unconditional-forgiveness problem, to which I have one of two responses. The first is to deny I did whatever it is I'm accused of doing. There is something in most of us which fears that if we admit what we've done God will take back the forgiveness—that God's granting forgiveness was just a ploy to get us to tell the truth, and that once we do that we're really gonna get it.

At other times I feel unworthy of God's forgiveness. A friend of mine used to talk about "worm theology," the belief that we are all worms unworthy of God's attention. Forgiveness flies in the face of worm theology. God's forgiveness implies that God loves us and wants to continue in relationship with us no matter what we've done. When we think about this possibility, we may find it impossible to imagine (that's also what makes it good news). Sometimes God's love and forgiveness are even harder to fathom on the national and international scene. That God loves and forgives those who starve or kill or harm others on a massive scale is difficult to comprehend, and even harder to accept.

It is our acceptance of God's forgiveness that makes the process complete. God forgives us no matter what; there's nothing we can do to induce or prevent that. But it is in conquering our fear of being unworthy, or our fear that God won't love us anymore if we confess what God already knows, that forgiveness takes root. Like the psalmist, we must be willing to say, "O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you." When we can do that the cycle of forgiveness is complete; we have not only received God's forgiveness, but accepted it. Now healing and change can occur.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu demonstrated the power of this in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which worked for the healing of the country. By providing a forum in which those who had victimized and harmed others could confess, Tutu's commission opened up a way for completing the cycle of forgiveness. "We are looking to the healing of relationships," Tutu said in a PBS interview. "We are seeking to open wounds, yes, but to open them so that we can

cleanse them and they don’t fester; we cleanse them and then pour oil on them, and then we can move into the glorious future that God is opening up for us.”

And so Murray was wrong: a good apology is not the best we can expect in this life. True, we do well to give a good apology—to God and to those we have harmed. But the best thing we can expect in this life—and it is already promised and given—is a good dose of forgiveness. God stands on every street corner 24 hours a day and seven days a week, telling each of us, “You are forgiven.” The only question is how we will respond.