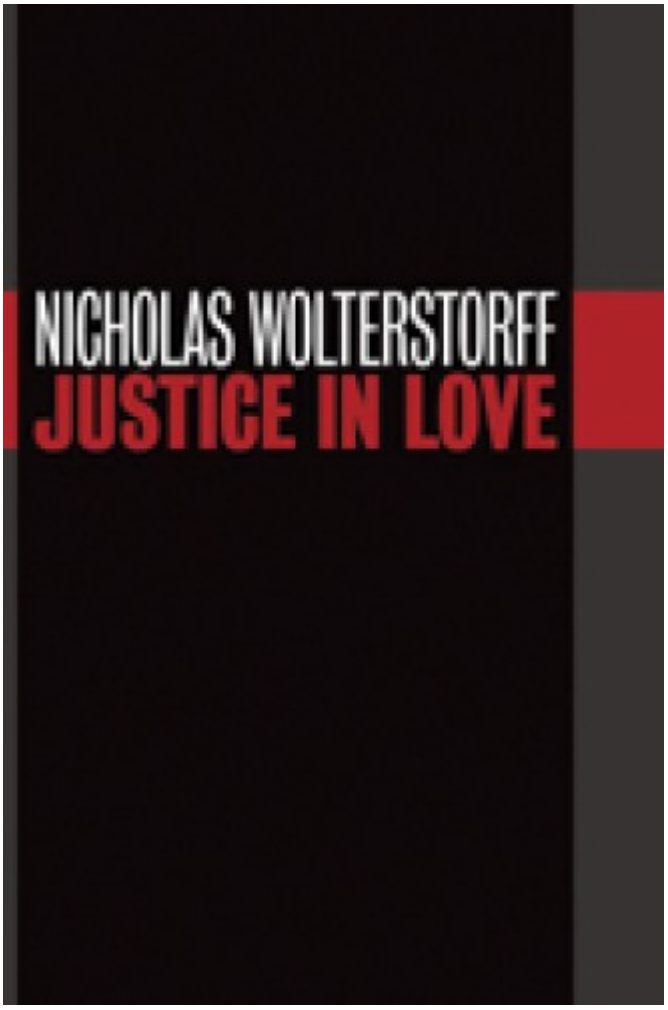
Generous forgiveness

by Walter Brueggemann in the November 29, 2011 issue

In Review



Justice in Love

By Nicholas Wolterstorff
Eerdmans

Nicholas Wolterstorff doesn't dumb anything down. He insists on closely reasoned, carefully parsed argument. He refuses facile writing and glib statements that might

make the argument easy. He does careful, demanding work on every page and insists that the reader travel along, doing equally hard work.

Of late the hard work done by Wolterstorff concerns questions of justice; preceding *Justice in Love* was his book *Justice: Rights and Wrongs.* Propelled to questions of justice by his encounter with apartheid in South Africa and with the suffering of the Palestinians, Wolterstorff pushes back to metaquestions, and by the time he finishes, the issues have been radically reframed.

In *Justice in Love,* Wolterstorff takes up the question of the relationship between agape love and justice. He arrives at that question via a quick but firm rejection of egoism, eudaemonism and utilitarianism as inadequate ways to think about the practice of well-being. The problem in each case is that self-interest and self-promotion cloud the capacity to commit to the other and that each approach seeks a universal formulation of practice that does not focus on the specific subject at hand.

As an alternative to these obvious philosophical options, Wolterstorff takes up agapism. His discussion concerns unconditional self-giving for the sake of the other that, while being enacted, valorizes the other. But he quickly acknowledges that such an unqualified focus on the flourishing of the other raises hard questions about rights—that is, about questions of justice. Thus his reflection is framed by the relation of agape love to justice and the issue of just deserts.

Wolterstorff's discussion is situated in relation to three major reflections on justice and love. The great Lutheran bishop Anders Nygren, in *Agape and Eros,* argued that agape love is completely selfless and so is rooted only in God's capacity to forgive. That book, so influential for the generation of this reviewer, simply dismissed questions of justice, insisting that agape proceeds unconditionally, even if it violates justice. Reinhold Niebuhr, however, argued in his works of critical realism that justice obtains in the public sphere and cannot be qualified by agape. Finally, Wolterstorff finds in Kierkegaard an affirmation that the gospel has changed everything about the issue of justice.

Wolterstorff's argument allows for legitimate self-love, which is not to be confused with self-indulgence (that is, it is love in the manner of the neighbor commandment); he sees that such love consists of benevolence toward the neighbor and includes doing justice. The command to love the neighbor is not a form of "the reciprocity code" but a call to care for everyone, even those who are unable to reciprocate.

Such love requires that we "de-center the self."

Wolterstorff presents an extended argument concerning forgiveness and generosity, which are at the center of agape love. It is not difficult to locate generosity and forgiveness in agape love; the wonderment has to do with how these are to be assessed in relation to justice, for they seem to be indiscriminate violations of what is fair and merited.

Concerning forgiveness, Wolterstorff eschews cheap grace. He sees that genuine forgiveness must be evoked by repentance, so that it is a moral transaction and not just a "relational, existential" one, as it has become in much pop theology. I find this to be an enormous clarification of an issue clouded over by both Nygren and Niebuhr. Wolterstorff's insistence on the moral dimension of forgiveness is at the heart of his thesis:

> The discovery of forgiveness was not possible within the framework of the ancient ethicists. . . . There are frameworks of thought within which forgiveness can find no home. Forgiveness entered the world along with the recognition of divine and human worth, of being wronged, of rights, of duty, of guilt. It cannot occur where those are not recognized.

"Full and complete forgiveness" will forego retribution but does not undermine justice, precisely because it has a moral dimension.

Forgiveness is an act of generosity that reaches out to affirm the worth of the other, a worth that is not diminished by affront. In a workable society, including a liberal democracy, there must be a capacity to act for the common good that is not limited to retribution. The common good requires that the other, even the offending other, be treated as a rational moral agent. Blind retributive justice violates moral agency and makes real social relationships impossible.

Wolterstorff offers a compelling comment on Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard, in which the landowner is not acting unjustly toward the workers who came early by being generous toward those who came later. No one was wronged in the parable, because the landowner kept faith with the early workers, even though he was generous toward the later workers.

It was not until I reached the end of the book that I could see where Wolterstorff was headed. The book culminates with a comment on the book of Romans, and the

author is not even a Lutheran! Not surprisingly, Wolterstorff, following Krister Stendahl and E. P. Sanders, identifies with the newer reading of Romans: the epistle is not preoccupied with "justification by grace" but concerns God's impartial generosity toward Jews and gentiles. God keeps covenant with Jews who have obeyed the Torah, but God reaches beyond the Jews toward gentiles who have not obeyed the Torah. Thus the requirement of justice is acknowledged; God has not violated the Jews who live in covenant. But God's generosity is fully just because God cares, in benevolent ways, for all those who are in the purview of God's rule.

God is a "lover of justice," but acts in generosity for those "outside the law" while taking seriously those "inside the law." God's "dismissal of charges" permits a new identity for both those inside the law and those outside the law who are alienated from God. In such generous forgiveness—which includes the moral accountability of faith—God enacts God's own mode of justice, which permits a new beginning and new social relationships.

This argument, breathtaking in its sweep, culminates in a daring exposition of divine justice, rooted in God's own life, a justice that is completely permeated by generosity. This is a meta-argument. Only in the last pages does it draw close to the specific reasons that God's transformative justice matters for our common good:

> Bodily passions impel us into wronging others. Negative emotions impel us—hatred, fear, jealousy, insecurity. And ideologies into which we have been inducted impel and lure us to trample on the rights of others: nationalism, militarism, materialism, racism, sexism, communism, capitalism, you name it.

Wolterstorff no doubt will continue the argument. Since he is focusing on Romans, we may expect him to carry the argument into Romans 12, where the people of God embrace the neighborly justice of God. This argument is sharply germane in a society that wants to exclude some—immigrants, gays, and even women and children in some venues—from the largess of the community. That God can dismiss charges and act restoratively in generosity, Wolterstorff shows, is a deep act of agape.