### “No Offense” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Oct. 2, 2022

**Habakkuk 1:2–4; 2:1–4**

2 O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? 3 Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me. . . 4 The law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous; so judgment comes forth perverted. . .

2:1I will stand at my watch-post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me. . . 2 Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. 3 For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. 4 Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

**Luke 17:1–4**

1 Jesus said to his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! 2It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. 3Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. 4And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”

Life in ancient Israel was very different from our own, with a different language, culture, and climate. But they were human, as we are, with the same good and bad points. Today’s passages both revolve around situations that deal with the negative aspect of human behavior—violence, injustice and lies. The first passage is written by a long-suffering prophet who dwells in a dangerous environment, feeling distressed and powerless to change the situation. He sees evil, and cannot prevent it. He asks when will evil stop? How can we stay firm and live through it? He gets an answer that comforts and strengthens his faith, faith that God sees and knows all. Nothing in this world is hidden from God. The gospel passage tells us that human behavior can be unjust, and misdeeds will happen, but with faith as our foundation every day, we will be able to forgive and to live faithfully through these situations. Our ultimate triumph is assured.

Both readings are fairly intense because they both have to do with dealing with evil. Let’s glance at Luke now. Verses 1 and 2 have to do with causing no offense, not being someone who causes evil. Verses 3–4 advise believers to *take* no offense, and to be forgiving. Of course, this means that offenses will happen, but we already knew that. We’ve all seen what people can be like. Habakkuk sees the looming threat of the Chaldean empire, and worries for Judah’s safety. He worries about evil-doing *within* society, as well as *between* societies. Why do the wicked surround the righteous? Why does evil-doing so often go unpunished? How are we to learn goodness if only bad examples are present?

Despite these burning questions, this believer will keep his faith; even more, he is entrusted with a message by God. He is to write it down and to keep it so brief that a runner running by could read it. Keep it simple! Wait for the vision, for it will come. The proud are not right with their spirit, but the righteous live by their faith. The proud have puffed themselves up, and there is no room in their lives for a spiritual outlook. But “The righteous live by their faith” (2:4). This becomes virtually the central slogan of the Apostle Paul, centuries later, who was looking for proof that faith was *always* the way to approach God. Changing the quote slightly, Paul wrote “the just shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11 KJV).

Here in this passage from the 6th century bc, Habakkuk seems to confirm that. He identifies with the Jewish people and more or less equates them with himself; both he and the Jewish people are waiting for “the vision,” and he confirms that it will come soon. Maybe the people will be comforted by the vision; maybe it will answer some of their questions about evil. Or maybe it just comes with a feeling of rightness, so that the spirit is right within them, unlike for the proud people. The internal guide will alert us to the nature and truth of God-like action. It will be recognizable, like seeing an old friend again. Truth and Spirit awaken this inner guide, and we resonate with these.

What exactly does Habakkuk think “the vision” will accomplish? It could be that the vision is a revelation of truth, and of God’s way of doing things. In any case, Habakkuk, although witnessing battles and other evils, still has a strong faith in the coming vision, and he encourages his readers to have that faith. To have faith is not to be passive, but to actively seek the will of God, allow that God-energy to strengthen you, and then to share God’s light.

In the Luke passage, Jesus observes that offenses or abuses will happen, but woe to him to brings them! Then he discusses the victims of these offenses, probably either children, or all vulnerable people, whom he calls “the little ones.” But woe to the one who causes offense to “one of these little ones” (17:2). If someone sins, we should rebuke them, but if they sin against us, we should forgive them. Forgiveness seems to be an essential part of the gospel. By forgiving, we are showing what God is like. God is forgiving. If we follow God’s and Jesus’ examples, we are bringing light into life here.

Let’s look again at this gospel passage. It says two different things about forgiveness. First, if the disciple sins, is rebuked, and then repents, he must be forgiven (17:3). It makes the forgiveness dependent upon repentance, for how can forgiveness be *fully* effective if the offender does not realize the offense? The offender needs to become aware of how his actions have affected others. The next sentence says something completely different. If the sin is against oneself, and the person comes and says “I repent,” then one must be ready to forgive at least seven times in one day (v. 4). One is not to be wrapped up in defending oneself or getting any compensation. It seems designed to make us less self-interested and less defensive.

But the passage also seems to say that if someone sins, you don’t have to forgive them if they don’t repent. If the person has sinned against you, and *claims* to repent, then you must be completely forgiving. Of course, seven confessions for seven crimes in the same day make the repentance claim hard to believe. It implies the sinner is insincere. Who would believe the claimed repentance after the second or third time, let alone the seventh? In that case it becomes a *personal* test that calls for one’s highest spirituality, for prayer-ful action and communication with the offender. A real come-to-Jesus moment!

In real life we know that this can be very difficult to put into practice. We are told to accept anyone’s claim that he is sorry, or that he wasn’t aware of it, even if, in reality, the claim rings hollow. Perhaps our willingness to accept anyone’s claimed repentance is a spiritually necessary action. We have to take their word for it. By forgiving we are released from resentment, we have let it go. It is now the antagonist who has to bear the responsibility and pursue a rightful action. Maybe we need to have Habakkuk’s faith: a vision will come; clear truth is on its way; wait for it.

Again, if the sin is against us, we are to be totally forgiving. But if the sin is against another, we can say “woe to the one from whom the offense came.” Then we only have to forgive if we think the person’s repentance is genuine. We have a right to defend others, but we are not supposed to defend ourselves personally. At least, that is the highest, most Jesus-like behavior. However, others could step forward to defend us, if they think the person has not genuinely repented from the wrong they did.

It’s a very unusual situation, but that seems to be the rule. In both cases, repentance is involved, or at least the *claim* to repent, in one case. In neither case is there any pretending that the wrong didn’t happen. There has to be some acknowledgment of reality. Now, true repentance is the balm that can heal both the perpetrator and the victim. Repentance and forgiveness can stop the cycle of evil.

In Matthew 18 we learn that sin need not remain private. Jesus says, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one” (Matt 18:15). But if the offender will *not* listen and does *not* repent, one can bring the matter before the congregation, and the offender will be thrown out of the congregation if he or she refuses to listen to the church (Matt 18:17). So there is recourse, even if the sin is directed at you. It seems the first reaction must be to accept the person’s apology or admission of guilt, which is implied in the statement “I repent.” But if a person has sinned and does not repent, there are consequences, at least in the congregation. The person doesn’t get a blank check to go on sinning.

If a person genuinely repents, they need to be accepted back into the community. On the other hand, if the community deems them to be insincere and hostile, they can banish such a person. This seems to be consistent with the way love operates—always with a high degree of concern for the other person, and with at least an initial willingness to believe any claim of repentance.

I have a story of repentance. Christian Picciolini became a member of a white nationalist hate group when he was 14. He felt he was part of something greater than himself. But he started to feel uneasy about his ideology, partly because of Johnny, a black security guard at his school who was compassionate toward him. Christian eventually had his turning point while he was actually beating a young black man. He locked eyes with the victim, and felt a surprising rush of empathy. He left the hate group and founded one called Life After Hate, which counsels and helps people who want to leave hate groups. Christian eventually apologized to Johnny for all the things he had said, and Johnny commended him for the work he was doing to help young people. (https://www.npr.org/2018/01/18/578745514/a-former-neo-nazi-explains-why-hate-drew-him-in-and-how-he-got-out) Now, *that’s* repentance and forgiveness!

Then there is the example of the centurion who supervised Jesus’ execution, and who said afterward, “Truly, this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:39). There are novels written about how he repented, was accepted by the Christian community, and became a Christian. I wonder how many lives were changed from his repentance.

Repentance and renewal by faith are part of the Christian ethic. Are there places in your own life where you need to practice repentance or forgiveness? Let us exemplify the life of faith and forgiveness, and *welcome* those who wish to enter the kingdom of God.