

September 17, 2017
Matthew 18:21-35
“Forgiveness and Saving Grace”
Michael Stanfield

Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven.

‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’

The words of God for the people of God. O Lord let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable on you sight, our rock and redeemer, amen.

He was the kind of villain that we love to hate in the movies. Only, this was no movie: It was the city of Rome under Nazi rule during the Second World War. Our villain is Colonel Herman Kappler, commander of the SS forces occupying Rome. As villains go, he had an impressive résumé:

* Upon the occupation of Rome by the Gestapo, he demanded a multimillion dollar ransom for the lives of the Roman Jews. With the help of Pope Pius XII, the chief rabbi of Rome raised the money within 24 hours, but Kappler took the money and began herding the Jews away in cattle trucks and wagons bound for the concentration camps anyway.

* Kappler’s SS routinely tortured and executed suspected members of the resistance.

* When a bomb planted by the militant communist underground killed 32 German soldiers in Rome, Kappler responded by randomly selecting 320 mostly civilian prisoners for slaughter – a 10-to-1 reprisal and so he wouldn’t have to worry about feeding them he included in that 320 all political prisoners, petty thieves and prostitutes that were being held in jail at the time. They were bound, marched through the streets of Rome, herded onto trucks and mowed down by

machine gun fire in the Ardeatine Caves. The entrances to the caves were blown up, sealing the dead and wounded behind hundreds of tons of rock.

For all his brutality, Kappler had not been able to capture the man who was behind the massive underground network that aided escaped Allied POWs and Jews in Rome. Kappler knew who the man was, but there was a problem: He was a Vatican priest. As long as he remained on neutral Vatican territory, Kappler was forbade by Hitler to touch him.

But this tough Irish priest was not the neutral territory type: In fact, Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty was a tall, broad-shouldered, accomplished amateur boxer who didn't run away from a fight. Through his wit and impressive golf game he had won over many of Rome's elite and was unlikely to sit out the war and allow his contacts with the powerful in Rome go unused. So Kappler had O'Flaherty watched, and finally, on one brilliant sunny winter morning, he had him cornered.

The Nazi SS had the palazzo of Prince Filippo Doria Pamphili surrounded. O'Flaherty was inside. Colonel Kappler stepped out of his black limousine to personally apprehend the troublesome priest. O'Flaherty raced down a narrow stone staircase into the cellar – no way out, nowhere to hide. The Germans were in the building now; he could hear them; they were yelling upstairs. They'd pull the place apart looking for him and would burst into the cellar any minute.

Too much was at stake for too many people for him to surrender to Kappler now – especially for Prince Filippo and the others upstairs who were compromised by O'Flaherty's presence. If he could somehow escape, the Nazis wouldn't be able to prove he had been there and would be forced to let the matter drop.

As he edged along the passageway that led to the cellar beneath the courtyard, he noticed a strange sound, like rocks rolling down a stone mountain-face. As he moved closer to the sound, he saw *light* – *daylight*! The prince's winter coal supply was sliding into a coal bin through an open trapdoor in the courtyard.

He scrambled up the pile of shifting coal and stuck his head out of the trapdoor. Two Italian coalmen were between him and the courtyard gates where the SS troops were keeping watch for him. The coal truck was parked outside the gates.

O'Flaherty took off his black monsignor's robe and hat put them into an empty coal sack. He tore his collarless shirt to his waist and rubbed coal dust all over himself from head to toe. With the cooperation of one of the coalmen *who had no love for the Nazis*, O'Flaherty strolled right past the two lines of SS troops, who disdainfully gave him a broad berth so they wouldn't get their uniforms dirty.

When he was out of the soldiers' sight, he took his priestly robe and hat out of the coal sack slung over his shoulder, tucked them under his arm, and rushed to the nearest church, where he cleaned up and set off for the safety of the Vatican. After several hours, he called Prince Filippo who said that everyone was safe and that Kappler was furious.

Now, only few months earlier, this Catholic priest from neutral Ireland working in the neutral Vatican city-state during the Second World War would never have imagined being in such a predicament. He had actually grown up an IRA sympathizer who absolutely detested the British. As a result, in the early years of the war, he had dismissed accounts of German atrocities as just Allied propaganda.

“I read the propaganda on both sides,” he would say, “and I don’t believe much of it. I don’t think there is anything to choose between Britain and Germany.”

And so, initially, O’Flaherty’s efforts to aid escaping *Allied* POWs could just as easily have been made on behalf of escaping *German* POWs if he had been in the midst of an Allied occupation. Initially he was simply helping souls in need.

But the sight of the Nazis carting away Roman Jews in 1943 made it impossible for O’Flaherty to remain neutral.

The Nazis’ treatment of the Roman Jews transformed O’Flaherty, who in turn transformed his fledgling, informal network of contacts into a massive partisan effort to save as many Allied soldiers and Roman Jews as possible. He came to understand that the Nazis *had* to be defeated. As a result, this Irishman who detested the British saved more Allied lives than any other single person in World War II – and more British than any other nationality. His efforts earned him the nickname, “the Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican,” and he was decorated, ironically, a Commander of the British Empire.

Well, Kappler and O’Flaherty played a life-and-death cat-and-mouse game in which O’Flaherty always managed to stay one step ahead of his archnemesis. In frustration, toward the end of the war, Kappler finally attempted to have the Irish priest forcibly dragged off the neutral Vatican territory and assassinated. O’Flaherty’s network got wind of the plan and arranged instead for the two Gestapo assassins to be indefinitely detained by four Swiss guards.

The bitter rivalry between this German Nazi and this Irish priest set the stage for O’Flaherty’s greatest rescue yet-to-come years later.

After the war, Colonel Kappler was tried and convicted for war crimes. He was sentenced to life imprisonment for his part in the slaughter of the 320 at the Ardeatine Caves.

Over 70 years later, we strain to contrive a villain more detestable than a Nazi war criminal who sent Jews to concentration camps and tortured and murdered innocent civilians.

Imagine, then, the hatred of those who actually experienced his evil. Many of you have expressed fear that such evil again might be unleashed and have expressed to me your hatred of that apparent evil in some of our very own political leaders.

For others of you, perhaps your hatred of evil comes in a different form. May it is your hatred for that vicious gossip at work or next door; maybe it’s your hatred for the pedophile who was

recently arrested and whose picture dons the latest issue of the Tribune – or maybe it’s that no-good son-in-law who treats your daughter so abusively; perhaps it is the work place of your young son where everyone treats him like a non-person just because he’s gay – or maybe – maybe it’s just that jerk who just cut you off in traffic on your way to church and almost made you crash your whole family into a roadside tree.

It’s the righteous hatred we all feel when we know we’re right, when we know that someone else has done something terribly wrong, when we’re certain that that person owes us or our loved ones or society something. It’s the hatred of the unforgiving servant who throttles his fellow servant and has him thrown in jail. “Let him rot till he’s paid me back!”

Back to our story. Only one person ever visited Kappler in prison. For years, almost every month, a tall, broad-shouldered figure of a man would call on the former Nazi. It was the Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican, Monsignor Hugh O’Flaherty, this time, on a different kind of rescue mission.

More than most of us, this tough Irishman had the courage to fight evil and to seek justice at tremendous personal risk. But he also knew that we are called to love our enemies and that even villains need God’s mercy.

Peter came up and asked Jesus, “Lord, when my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times?” “No,” Jesus replied, “not seven times; I say, seventy times seven times” (Matthew 18:21-22, NAB).

Forgiveness is not saying the offense never happened. It did.

Forgiveness is not saying that everything’s okay. It most certainly is NOT.

Forgiveness is not saying we no longer feel the pain of the offense. We most definitely DO.

For Father O’Flaherty, forgiveness was saying “I still feel the pain, but I am willing to let go of *your* involvement in my pain.”

For Father O’Flaherty, forgiveness was an attitude of faith whereby he was able to turn over to God the business of how the other guy is doing.

For Father O’Flaherty, forgiveness was saying to Kappler, “I’m okay, and I am willing to let God deal with whether you are okay, and I am willing to let go of my need to be the instrument of correction and rebuke in your life.”

In fact, Father O’Flaherty continued to visit Kappler and show him the love of Christ. And finally, in March 1959, Herman Kappler, former SS colonel, Nazi war criminal, sought forgiveness and salvation in the waters of baptism poured out by the hand of Monsignor Hugh O’Flaherty.

Who in your life might *you* be called to entice to those very same waters?

Let us pray.

Ever loving God, we come from a world that uses your name as a curse word. Men and women, claiming to follow your way, hate and kill each other because of differences of creed, nationality, race and sexual identity or they whole heartedly support leaders who seem bent on doing just that. Even in our homes and church we find fault with each other and bear grudges. Lead us away from our feelings of self-righteousness and self-concern. Give us the capacity, like Father O'Flaherty and like your son both to stand against the injustices caused by evil at the peril of our very lives, *and* to forgive those who perpetrate that evil.

And now bless these gifts that we give that they may also go toward that end. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

*The story of Kappler and O'Flaherty comes from the Sept 12, 1999 issue of Homiletics Magazine.