*100 Denarii*

September 13th, 2020

In 1969, Hugo Santiago made a black and white film noir titled *Invasion*, written by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares. In some ways the film is reminiscent of *Alphaville* by Jean-Luc Godard. A fire at the Laboratorio Alex destroyed the film during the early days of the *junta* in Argentina, and it took thirty years of painstaking work to restore the entire film from the negatives. It was released again in the 1990s, and to some degree welcomed as a parable of the lost years. One of the main themes of the film is the reversal of ideas. In an opening scene, a man is walking across a street in Buenos Aires. Another man in a hurry bumps into him, but it is the man crossing the street who apologizes for being in a hurry, even though he was walking slowly. Our world is similarly reversed in many ways today when it comes to morality and forgiveness, and this reversal drives us further into chaos and darkness. Our world writes off sin as irrelevant, and writes off people as without value. Almost every night I teach, I will end up having to teach a student who was never taught proper grammar or composition, and yet was told he or she was just not good at writing. Some of these students have gone onto university. One of the beautiful things about the Argentine film is its history that works as a parable for us. Our sins burn us up, but our loving Christ painstakingly restores us with His Spirit through forgiveness and healing. What was lost becomes found; what was dead becomes alive. It is the primary reason for Christ's coming into history. To forgive and to teach us to forgive.

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n our gospel reading today, the disciples learn the heart of the gospel. Peter asks Jesus to what point should we forgive: "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-seven times.'" (Matthew 18:21-22). In other translations, this is *seventy times seven.* Whatever we think of as great mercy is still vastly behind what God shows to us. Jesus switches from arithmetic to parable fairly quickly, however, to remind us that it is not about amounts our ideas of amounts, but about the heart: "‘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.’ (Matthew 18:21-35). Jesus lived this out in his life and death.

100 *denarii* were nothing compared to ten thousand *talents.* An old commentary says: "The 100 denarii debt could be carried in one pocket. The ten thousand talent debt would take to carry it an army of about 8,600 carriers, each carrying a sack of sixpences 60 lbs. in weight; and they would form, at a distance of a yard apart, a line five miles long! The contrast between the debts is staggering. The point is that nothing men can do to us can in any way compare with what we have done to God; and if God has forgiven us the debt we owe to him, we must forgive our fellow-men the debts they owe to us. Nothing that we have to forgive can even faintly or remotely compare with what we have been forgiven." (William Barclay, *Barclay Study Bible*, NT). When we owe the equivalent of 3,000,000 dollars, we still demand payment for 8 dollars. That is our nature when we do not know Christ. There are times when we wonder: *Could I really owe ten thousand talents? And am I the kind of person who demands the 100 denarii from others in my life? And if God is love—isn't it impossible that I should owe Him anything or that my sins should affect Him in any way? Have I really committed all those sins that others commit?* Your sin is real, and your debt is real.There is not a sin in the Scriptures that does not damage my neighbour, or lead to my poor health or death, and there is not a sin in the Bible that does not lead to my soul death or my separation from God. Our revisionist heritage has placed arbitrary timelines on what is sinful and not sinful. This denies the intrinsic goodness of values and it denies the immutability of God, who does not lie or change His mind (Numbers 23:19), and with whom "there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17). I believe the Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski aptly challenged some of our revisionism and relativism in his ten-part film series *Dekalog,* which examines the effects of breaking the 10 Commandments in modern society, in Warsaw in the 1980s. Essentially, the films show sin as departing from the sacred: the sanctity of God and worship, the sanctity of speech, the sanctity of time, the sanctity of authority, the sanctity of life, the sanctity of love, the sanctity of dominion, the sanctity of truth, and the sanctity of contentment (cf. *Wikipedia,* s.v. *Dekalog*). Whatever is not sanctified in your life is decay. If you do not believe you need to be forgiven so much, then you do not know the goodness, holiness or love of God, and you probably won't forgive others. You are not living. You are decaying. You are passing into death. Every time you deny the 10,000 talents you owe and demand your 100 denarii, you are blacking out the world a little more.

Forgiveness is a picture of God. The New Testament shows us beautiful stories of forgiveness. Jesus will not condemn the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), the tax-collector who oppressed the people and extorted their money (Luke 19:1-10). In the Acts of the Apostles, we see how Paul quarrelled bitterly with Barnabas over John Mark (Acts 15:35-41). Mark had abandoned them on an earlier missionary journey, and Paul did not want to bring him along. Yet, years later, he desires the company of John Mark, saying to Timothy: "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). Because of forgiveness, Mark was given a chance to grow and mature in the Spirit. The gospel of John ends with a scene of forgiveness for Peter, who denied Christ three times. It is at the end of a book that we have the beginning of a new book, the book of all that will happen to the forgiven disciple! Redemption gives us a brand new book to write. We might consider the process of forgiveness as similar to editing. A good editor can see the beauty nascent within a chaotic text full of errors: "Curved arrows sweep across the page. Double-strikethroughs delete extra words. Questions line the margins. Black blots seep two pages deep, with an explanation: 'My pen broke!' Blue-colored edits are no gentler: 'don’t need'; 'passive voice'; 'where are we?' A concluding end-note spans the back of two pages, opening with gentle praise, but then reaching the soul of the story. A great teacher is a gift. A great line editor is a miracle" (Nick Ripatrazone, "Is Line Editing a Lost Art?", *Literary Hub,* February 6, 2019). Christ is both our teacher and our line editor, and sometimes our stationer. There are times when the manuscripts of our lives get so marked up, there seems nothing we can do to salvage them. They are to be burnt. The life of the Spirit nevertheless gives us a new page to write on and the means to write it.

You will not find forgiveness in things, sadly. Your political views, education, wealth and fashionable clothes, your lifestyles and worldwide experience, your citizenship in one of the safest and highest ranked nations of the world will not make you just or forgiving. Those things might even numb you to real love. They do not sanctify you. Forgiveness comes from God living in us. It is God working through you that makes your heart and your actions just and loving. Perhaps I am abusing the metaphor of stationery too much, but I recall the very sad poem by Zbigniew Herbert titled, "Elegy for the Departure of Pen Ink and Lamp"—a very bitter questioning of the writing process: "lightly we leave the gardens of childhood the gardens of things/ scattering manuscripts oil lamps dignity and pens on our flight/ such is our deluded journey along the cliff side of nothingness…forgive me for my ingratitude O pen with your archaic nib/ and you inkwell—you still contained so many good ideas/ forgive me oil lamp—you die out like a deserted campsite…I paid for my betrayal/ but then I didn't know/ you were gone forever…and that it would be/dark" (Zbigniew Herbert, *The Collected Poems 1956-1998.* New York: Ecco, 2007. 462-463). After such an unforgiving, pessimistic elegy for his beloved tools, it is no wonder that all that is left is dark. To not forgive is to snuff out the lamp and sit in darkness. It is to deny your own culpability and the hope of redemption in someone else. It is to cut yourself off from the rest of humanity and to cut others off from yourself. It is to cut off the possibility of newness and hope. To not forgive is apostasy and a failure to love. Forgiveness works in the other direction. While forgiveness may not always translate into thriving friendships, it nevertheless provides the page to be written on, the possibility and openness that is the prerequisite for friendship and peace. Forgiveness cancels the debt; it acknowledges the humanity and dignity of the offender; it acknowledges our common heritage and destiny; it promises the further relationship on equal terms. Forgiveness helps restore the offender and the one offended. To forgive someone is to desire their well-being as you desire your own. It is the thirst for redemption. It lights the lamp, stretches out the clean sheet of paper, and writes a new love letter.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live" (Psalm 103:1-5).