
The Holy Cross is Holy Forgiveness

**An Evensong meditation by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Eve of Holy Cross Day**

Forty-five years ago, I studied with a man named Henri Nouwen. He was my Professor of Spirituality, though that is an odd combination of words. I remember a particular story, a political story, he often told. It was about compassion, but I think it could also describe forgiveness.

Apparently, in the politically tumultuous 1960s and 70s, Henri Nouwen and a group of pastoral theologians visited Senator and former Vice-President of the United States, Hubert Humphrey. They were there to ask him about compassion in politics. Here is how Nouwen tells it:

"One day, the three of us visited the late Senator Hubert Humphrey to ask him about compassion in politics. We had come because we felt he was one of the most caring human beings in the political arena. The Senator, who had just finished talking with the ambassador of Bangladesh, and obviously expected a complaint, a demand, or a compliment, was visibly caught off guard when asked how he felt about compassion in politics.

Instinctively, he left his large mahogany desk, over which hung the emblem reminding visitors that they were speaking with the former Vice-President of the United States, and joined us around a small coffee table. But then, after having adapted himself to the somewhat unusual situation, Senator Humphrey walked back to his desk, picked up a long pencil with a small eraser at its end, and said in his famous high-pitched voice,

"Gentlemen, look at this pencil. Just as the eraser is only a very small part of this pencil and is used only when you make a mistake, so compassion is only called upon when things get out of hand. The main part of life is competition, only the eraser is compassion. It is sad to say, gentlemen, but in politics compassion is just part of the competition...." (Henri J. M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*. New York: Image Books, 1982. pp. 5-6).

That image of an eraser stays with me, even though the story reveals something discouraging about politics, from a politician who was known as being compassionate!

Compassionate people know how to use the eraser. Forgiveness is that eraser. Forgiveness is the eraser. Learning how to forgive means learning how to erase. Sadly, social media posts are often the pencil! Every careless comment can be a sharp pencil! Is there even such a thing as an eraser on social media? I don't know.

(Two nights ago, I was showing my young grandson how to use an old manual typewriter. He was fascinated. At one point, he asked, where is the delete button?) Is there such a thing as an eraser in politics? Maybe not.

But there is such a thing as forgiveness in church. As I said earlier today, in our morning services, the church is a grand laboratory for forgiveness. This evening, as we observe the Feast of the Holy Cross, the cross shows us forgiveness, over and over again, seven times seventy times. And, if we are paying attention, our families and households are the same spiritual laboratories, where we learn to forgive and where we learn how to be forgiven. Both sides of the forgiveness are critical: giving forgiveness and receiving forgiveness. Giving release, and receiving release.

The cross means forgiveness. And to forgive means to erase. To forgive means to release, truly one of the major principles of the Christian life. To release. For, when we release others, we suddenly feel ourselves released, too. When we let go of what we believe people owe us, then it is we who feel wonderfully free. The

way God sets people free, is by using people to do it! God uses us to set his people free.

Let us bless the Lord!

AMEN.

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