

OPENING:

It was New Year's Eve 1981, a local teenager was driving home from a party late that night. The young man, a Fairfax High School student named Kevin Tunell, was driving his Dodge Station wagon on Commonwealth Boulevard just a few miles from here, when a Volkswagen bus driven by another teenager, named Susan Herzog—a senior at Robinson High school—approached from the other direction.

You probably know how this story ends, because stories like that—New Year's Eve, teenagers, late-night driving after a party—tend to end one way.

You might know also how this story ends because you lived through it, since it only happened a few miles from here and, I am sure, dominated the news at the time.

The story continues like this: Kevin Tunell, who had been drinking that night, allowed his car to swerve over the yellow line on a curve on Commonwealth and struck Susan Herzog's vehicle and killed her. She was only a mile from her house: a young life gone forever, and another life *changed* forever.

PARABLES:

I taught high school for many years and was often a part of efforts to combat teen drinking and driving. Stories similar to the one I just shared were told, and you always knew how they were going to end.

They were parables of a sort, stories that featured people and situations that were close-to-home and relatable but also difficult and important.

Parables invite you to enter into the story, to imagine yourself as this person or that. In a high school auditorium, we would ask the young people to imagine themselves as the parent of the victim, as the person who caused the accident, as the bystanders who might have enabled it to happen.

‘With what you know now’, we were asking, ‘how might this story be remembered differently?’”

GOSPEL:

In our Gospel reading, we are likewise invited to enter into the story.

“What would you do if you were the king, the first slave, the second slave?
How would you feel? Would you be able to forgive?

How might that story end differently?”

At the beginning of our Gospel reading, Peter had asked Jesus: “how many times should I forgive someone.... Seven times?” Jesus responds: “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”¹

After that, there is a parable that we expect to explain that point in story form, to demonstrate the limitlessness of God’s ability to forgive. Instead, we hear a story where the king forgives only once, and the slave, after being forgiven the whole world, condemns his peer for nothing.

So.. this parable unnerves us, pushes us to the limit, just as the task of forgiveness does. We wish, perhaps, that the slave would offer forgiveness to the second slave, who in turn would pass that spirit of forgiveness on to the next person, and the next person, and so on.²

That would make more sense.

FORGIVENESS:

But we don’t quite get the story we expected.

Our Gospel parable, and our modern day one, instead challenge us with their endings.

Back to 1982, Kevin Tunell, after pleading guilty to involuntary manslaughter and drunk driving, was sentenced to three years of probation and a year of community service lecturing on the perils of drinking and driving.

Many complained that the Fairfax Circuit Court judge had pronounced a relatively light sentence for someone who caused another’s death.

The teenagers and college students who listened to Tunell during his court-mandated lectures, however, came out with the impression that he *was* sorrowful

¹ Matthew 18.21-22.

² McKenzie, Alyse. “Radical Forgiveness and 9/11: Reflections on Matthew 18:21-35” *Patheos* (September 2, 2011).

<http://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/09/radical-forgiveness-and-911-alyce-mckenzie-09-02-0211.aspx?p=2>

and apologetic. Tunell hoped that his work would prevent similar incidents from happening in the future.³

RIGOR and MERCY:

Telling the truth, confronting wrong behavior, making amends, forgiveness in action—this sounds about right.⁴

But in our parable, it does not work that way. The King offers a blanket pardon, an astronomical sum is forgiven, and the slave repays him not by learning his lesson but by trying to cash in on another debt for a tiny amount.

What gives?

Likewise, there is a twist in the story of Kevin Tunell and Susan Herzog.

In addition to the probation and community service, the Herzog family had originally sought \$1.5 million in civil damages.

But then, in a Shakespearean, if not down-right Biblical, turn—the parents met with Kevin Tunell, and declined to seek that amount. Instead, they asked for only \$936. \$936, because they were asking Kevin Tunell to send a check for \$1 every Friday, the day their daughter died, for 18 years, her age at the time of her death.

In the parent's minds, Kevin Tunell had never known their daughter, but he had killed her. Thus, writing the name "Susan Herzog" on the check, week after week after week, that would make him remember her.

That way, he could never forget her.

So Tunell starts writing the checks and continues to travel all across the state and country to do talks warning others about the dangers of drunk driving.

Time goes by, at some point, however, Kevin Tunell stopped writing the checks. The Herzog family was angry: we let you off easy, we ask you to do this one thing, and yet you cannot do it.

Kevin Tunell appears in court, crying, saying that their daughter's life haunts him, that "You get to a point where you kind of snap—and you say, it hurts too much... I used to... lie in bed, and if I heard ... noises, I used to think Susan was going to come to visit me."⁵

³ Moore, Molly. "Fairfax High School Senior Tells Peers About 'How I Killed Someone'" *Washington Post*. (March 13, 1982) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1982/03/13/fairfax-high-school-senior-tells-peers-about-how-i-killed-someone/b69c4b8c-ec4b-4614-9946-73df29c02759/>

⁴ Hare, Douglas. 1993. *Matthew*. Louisville: John Knox, 216 ; Matthew 18.15-20.

⁵ Hewitt, Bill and Ted Nugent. Kevin Tunell Is Paying \$1 a Week for a Death He Caused and Finding the Price Unexpectedly High." *People*. (April 16, 1990). <https://people.com/archive/kevin-tunell-is-paying-1-a-week-for-a-death-he-caused-and-finding-the-price-unexpectedly-high-vol-33-no-15/>; Other examples of the many online sources concerning this story are: <https://thecripplegate.com/tunnelvision-the-personal-purgatory-of-kevin-tunell/>; <http://www.bible-study-lesson-plans.com/how-to-forgive-someone.html>; <https://www.mitchalbom.com/one-dollar-a-week-too-high-for-justice/>

It turns out Tunell had *tried* to send 47 \$1 checks in one envelope, all at once, but the parents would not accept the lump sum.

He even tried to show up to court with a box of signed checks, dated through 2001, past the date of the original agreement, that was more than the amount of \$936.

But the parents would not relent and insisted he would do it every Friday, \$1, until the 18 years were up.

TORTURE:

I don't have any easy answers about forgiveness, because forgiveness is hard: it is for Peter in our reading, it is for the king and the slave in the parable, and it is for us as well.

I would have difficulty telling the parents of Susan Herzog to let go, even though I am pretty sure that is my job as a priest.

I think I would have an easier time saying that the method that they chose to extract the debt, to elicit forgiveness, sounds an awful lot like *torture*.... For all involved.

Can you imagine waiting by the mail every week for this check to come? Counting on a teenager to fulfill this Sisyphean task of reaching this goal of \$936, knowing deep down inside that it just would never do the job... for either party.

It would be... torture which is where the slave ended up in our parable anyway. Notice how torture is not punishment in Hell or some otherworldly spot, it becomes the Hell that we have created for us here on earth.⁶

CONCLUSION:

Kevin Tunnell eventually fulfilled the requirement and paid his debt.... but you still can't tie up this parable in a neat bow, it eludes our ability to "solve it" or "figure" it out.

In cases like this, the question of "how do we forgive?" also can be asked "how do we remember?" Certainly where violence and trauma are involved.

<https://viriniachronicle.com/?a=d&d=JJ19821029.1.3&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->;

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/03/30/va-couple-wont-let-driver-forget-killing-their-daughter/ce55d54a-da0c-46ac-afa7-3f05bd01486d/>

⁶ Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 200.

The word “remember” literally means to put your body parts back together, after they have been torn apart, “dismembered.”

Maybe we have to recognize that something must die, for us to be able to forgive, Knowing that, always, with the God we proclaim, that life will be put back together and rise again.

Then you can say: “that story sounds familiar.... You can ask”

“Where do I remember a story like that before?

How does that one end?

Who is forgiven and who forgives?”

AMEN