

“If we do not forgive...” (2008)

Houston Hodges, for Writer’s Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

A drunk driver kills two teenaged lovers in a fiery crash at one of the city’s busiest intersections. The day after the tragedy a classmate of the couple is quoted on television: “If we don’t forgive him, we’ll never get past this.”

I wondered what that meant.

It surely cannot mean that we forget the event occurred, nor that there were lifelong consequences for at least three families, plus a widening circle of others in touch with them. Two vibrant young lives have ended, another life seems headed for a fearsome term of imprisonment, a destination which has not had an outstanding record for character development. There was cause, and there are effects; you do not elect a person who has served a term for embezzlement as your club treasurer. There must be serious attention to leading the survivor to comprehend the dreadful results of his actions and changing his life; there must be time for compassionate healing of the emotional damage to family and friends of the victims; there ought to be attention given to traffic patterns and safety precautions at the intersection where the collision happened.

It probably does not mean “Forgiving and forgetting;” some memories are indelible.

How can forgiveness happen? Perhaps it means looking into one’s own history with the long view of candor, to see how close one has come to creating the same disaster, or one just like it: the times when a drink too many has not been detected or resulted in an accident; or when a surrender to one of our other addictions (drugs, cell-phones, bigotry, greed, gossip, Facebook) has gone undetected and caused hurt only to ourselves. Maybe it means digging deeper to comprehend the fullness of humanity: that we are not merely saints or sinners, hero(in)es or villains, but some of each and some of both, all at the same time. It may not mean that Nero or Hitler or Judas or Osama bin Laden are characters to admire or commend to our children in their bedtime stories, but simply acknowledging that these men, too, had mothers who loved them and societal factors that helped mold them... and that with a few tips of happenstance our lives might have gone the same direction as theirs. Or theirs, as ours! Is it possible to say, “I abhor what you did, but I understand how you could have done it. I don’t hate you. I forgive

you.”

That might be a help in whatever “getting past it” might mean. Or it might not. What do you think would help?