

Forgiveness' Restorative Grace

On September 26, 1944, Ray Hamley, an RAF flying officer, and his crew, flying an American-built B-25, dropped bombs on the town of Kleve just inside Germany's border with Holland. Ray was 21 years old, and his bombs that day hit the railroad station, a number of Nazi factories, and the town church. He had an inkling that one of his bombs hit the church, but war was war. On the ground that day a young woman in Kleve mourned not only the loss of her church, but the loss of her parents who happened to live in a house next to the church. For the town of Kleve, 647 civilians and 879 military personnel would die before the Second World War was over.

Meanwhile, Ray Hamley went home to England after the war, married his childhood sweetheart, and became the head of a primary school. But then in 1983, someone handed Ray a newspaper clipping that showed how the people of a little town in Germany named Kleve were rebuilding the Church of St. Mary that had been bombed during the war. Something triggered in Ray's memory. He found his old logbook in the attic, and suddenly realized that it had been his bomb that had destroyed the church back in 1944.

An impulse was born in his heart as he thought about that tiny town, and how the loss of the church must have touched those people. But then came the temptation ignore the prompting. . He thought to himself, "Come on, Ray, after all, the Nazis bombed innocent children in London and Warsaw; it was wartime; it was years ago; forget it, Ray, and get on with your life; it's not your concern." But thank God, Ray Hamley did not let those second thoughts win out. He wrote to the Mayor of Kleve, asking for the forgiveness of the townspeople, and requesting that his letter be read by the priest at the dedication of the new church building. In 1984, Ray got a reply from the people of Kleve, requesting that he and his family come and see the new church building. But again, those second thoughts attacked Ray, and he could not even answer the letter.

Once more the parish priest in Kleve wrote to Ray, this time with a letter signed by 500 parishioners offering their forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ! Ray Hamley went to Kleve. His visit not only healed old wounds in his life, but has brought about an incredible reconciliation between Ray's hometown in England and the people of Kleve in Germany. And it all happened because by the power of God, Ray Hamley was able to conquer his second thoughts. For Ray Hamley, this was a turning point in his life.¹

Psychologists tell us about three common reactions to a frightening situation. We will (a) choose to face the situation and work through it, (b) shut down and do nothing, or (c) run away from the problem. In other words, fight, freeze, or flee.²

Ray Hamley was tempted to freeze, but in the end chose face the situation head on and a remarkable reconciliation resulted from it.

In today's reading from Genesis we read of a similar healing. From chapter 37 through to Genesis chapter 50 we have been reading the Story of Jacob and his family. Jacob whose name means 'the deceiver' gives birth to twelve sons, and he plays the favorite with Joseph. That is until his ten older brothers have had it with Joseph and take advantage by selling him into

¹ <https://sermons.com/sermon/the-good-samaritan/1339117>

² <https://wau.org/meditations/>

slavery to Midianite Bedouins who in turn take him to Egypt and sell him to a man named Potiphar.

The story is fraught with human pride and resentment resulting in the destruction of relationships, exhibited by fear and guilt. It is only when we get to the story's final chapters, after Jacob, dies that we read of the moving reconciliation that occurs between Joseph and the brothers. They are afraid and choose the face the situation because they imagine Joseph might now exact revenge now that dad is dead. Listen again to Joseph's answer:

***Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹ So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.*³**

The work of forgiveness in the stories I have told today is representative of restorative grace. St. Mary's not only rebuilt their Church but even more importantly relationships were healed because Ray was willing to act. By the forgiveness Joseph extended to his brothers restorative grace healed decades old wounds where kindness overcame guilt and resentment.

Are there places in your life where our blessed Mother St. Mary is wanting to rebuild relationships? People of whom you need to ask forgiveness, or people you need to forgive? If so don't let fear lead you to freeze or flee. Rather choose to face it and discover the gift of restorative grace, the consequence of true forgiveness.

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Ge 50:19–21). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.