“Pure Madness or Holy Insight?”
Genesis 45:3–11, 15; Luke 6:27–38
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
February 20, 2022

I read a story last fall about two women whose lives were devastated by the terrorism of 9/11 (plough.com, September 8, 2021). Phyllis Rodriguez lost her thirty-one-year-old son, Greg, to the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. He worked on the 103rd floor of the North Tower, just a few floors above the impact zone of the hijacked airliner. Aicha el-Wafi lost her son to terrorism and life in prison. His name is Zacarias Moussaoui, he is the infamous “twentieth hijacker” who was unable to join the attack, convicted for conspiracy to destroy aircraft and sentenced to life in prison.

When Aicha el-Wafi came to the United States from France to see her son, Phyllis Rodriguez decided that she wanted to meet her. The two women embraced one another and cried together. They told their stories through an interpreter. Aicha grew up in Morocco and moved to France, struggled to raise four children, Zacarias was the youngest. She shared pictures of her son as a child, teen and young adult. Phyllis talked about relatives she lost in the attack, including her son, and then the two women shared lunch. They felt a natural bond, a human connection. “We were only mothers there,” Phyllis says, “We both suffered on account of our sons, the attacks disrupted both of our lives.”

When asked if she has forgiven the hijackers, Phyllis says no, she does not forgive them for what they did, but she wishes she knew what motivated them to become a part of al-Qaeda. Understanding is the first step toward forgiveness, she says, we must recognize our common humanity and realize that, given different circumstances, we might do what others have done.

How do we react to this story? Phyllis does not meet with Zacarias Moussaoui, but she does meet with his mother. She does not offer cheap forgiveness to the terrorists; in fact, she doesn’t offer any forgiveness at all; but she wants to move in that direction, she wants to understand the

actions of the hijackers and find something in common with them. If we were in her shoes, would we do that, could we do that? Some might think her actions dishonor the memory of her son — though she vigorously disagrees — that she is terribly naïve, foolish even; meeting with Moussaoui's mother was pure madness, like any effort to befriend those who are involved in any way in actions that threaten or harm us.

But before we embrace this perspective fully, we might want to consider Jesus' teachings in our reading from Luke. "Love your enemies," Jesus says, "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Is he serious? Has he lost his mind? Loving others, even when it is challenging, seems noble, but there have to be some limits in the real world. He is our Savior and Lord, but the Jesus who is talking here seems incredibly naïve. He seems like a wide-eyed dreamer! But then, we have read about another dreamer — Joseph, the royal advisor in Egypt who extends kindness to his brothers who sold him into slavery. There is something noble in his remarkable gesture, something redemptive. Could there be something we need to hear in Jesus' words? Is this pure madness or holy insight, the one thing that can change the world?

Well, there is something we need to clarify before we go any further. This approach to love and forgiveness that Joseph practices and Jesus talks about does not dismiss wrongdoing any more than Phyllis Rodriguez does. Wrong is still wrong and always will be, and thus it is appropriate that we feel anger in response to it.

In a video we viewed during our recent programs on responding to anti-Semitism, Rabbi Greyber from Beth El Synagogue in Durham notes that in Jewish tradition there is a calling to love God and hate evil. He says this in response to Imam Antepli's open acknowledgment that he is not only saddened by the attack on the synagogue in Texas, but angered

as well. Anger must be managed, like any gift from God, Antepli says, but it is a gift and it is okay to feel it. In fact, he insists, to witness wrongdoing like the evils of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and racial injustice, and not feel anger is a sign that at the deepest level of our being we don't really care.

When we experience or witness wrongdoing in our families, in our schools and workplaces, in society, it is not only okay to feel anger, we should feel anger! When a friend of my family's was stabbed to death in Louisville, Kentucky, years ago, and his murder was never investigated because he was gay, I can assure you that we felt not only sadness but anger as well. Those who experience abuse or persecution have every right to feel anger and do everything they can to stop the abuse or persecution, or at least get away from it.

We are called to love God and hate evil, Rabbi Greyber says… but then he adds — we are to hate evil, not people. There is a difference, and that difference helps guide our anger into constructive, even redemptive, paths rather than the pursuit of revenge which is not only harmful to others but self-destructive as well.

But there is a place for naming wrong for what it is and feeling what we feel in response to it. Our call to a demanding kind of love and forgiveness does not do away with these realities.

But the call exists, nonetheless, and quite often it is not madness but the most practical course of action available. What are the options when we have been hurt or where there has been conflict between groups or nations? We can pretend it doesn't matter, but it does, and often this kind of false dismissal empowers more aggressive behavior. Another option is to seek revenge, to get even, but this never undoes the wrong nor does it do away with the sadness and anger. Anger, like lust, is never satisfied. And in any substantive conflict, is the score ever even? Consider the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the tensions between Russia and the Western world, our most bitter personal disputes — the score is never even because the parties don't agree upon whose responsibility the dispute is, who is to blame, who started it all.

So, the path of forgiveness and love for those who harm us is the only option left, and the only one that has a chance of accomplishing anything redemptive and enduring. As Desmond Tutu once said about the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, "It is clear that if we look only to retributive justice, then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future (*The Sunflower*, p. 268)."

It is the *Truth* and Reconciliation Commission. There is no denial of the reality of suffering inflicted upon black South Africans during Apartheid. But if reconciliation is the goal, a peaceful way forward for all, forgiveness is required. It is the most practical kind of love for the enemy, seeking their best interest, and it expresses self-love as well.

CBF missionaries Bob and Janice Newell tell the story of two boys in Tirana, Albania, who understood these realities (*Newell Post*, January, 2005). The father of one of the boys was killed by the other's father and then, pursuant to obligations of the Balkan blood feud tradition, the uncle of the boy whose father was killed took the life of the other's father, leaving both boys fatherless.

The tradition of vengeance called for an ongoing cycle of hatred, but the boys decided to stop it. They developed a covenant of forgiveness through which they declared a willingness to forgive "those who did not give us the possibility to be like all the others… (and) those who do not know what it means to forgive… because we know what it means to lose parent, family, precious life, school…"

Very often children do lead the way. Loving the enemy can be the most practical way forward.

But even when it is not, we are still called to love without limits because this is how the God who was in Christ has loved us. "Be merciful," says Jesus, "just as your Father — God — is merciful."

One reason we struggle to love our enemies is that we don't think they are worthy of our love, which they may or may not be. But are we worthy of the love we have received from God and other people? I have told some of you before that my grandmother in Lincolnton used to call

me “an angel a’walkin’” which I was, of course… in her eyes. But I wasn’t a perfect child, though I was not an evil one either. I was with a group of young people who took a box of toilet paper from a funeral home — a member of the group was part of the family that ran the business — and used it to roll a yard next to my grandmother’s. I didn’t take the toilet paper, but I didn’t try to stop the group either nor did I ever come clean when my grandmother wondered what kind of horrible people would roll a yard in toilet paper.

I’ll not ask for public confession now, but we all have shortcomings and imperfections, we have all had moments we’d rather not replay in our own minds much less before God and the whole world! This doesn’t mean we are evil or worthless, and in a sense, God always sees us as being worthy of love, sacrificial love, in fact. But if love is about measuring up on some goodness scale, where is the line that we cannot cross and still remain good? None of us is worthy, yet all are made worthy in God’s grace, which is why we are called to extend grace to others. Whether or not they deserve it is beside the point.

Phyllis Rodriguez begins her story about meeting with Zacarias Moussaoui’s mother by describing her morning on 9/11. It was a beautiful morning and as she walked along, she saw a majestic blue heron that did not fly away when she approached but stood peacefully beside the Bronx River Parkway. It was such a peaceful moment. She says now that when she thinks back to that day, she still remembers the image of the plane sticking out of the building, but she also remembers the heron, and she hopes for a more peaceful tomorrow.

Her path is the way we get there. The way of loving the enemy, the one who has hurt us. It may seem like pure madness, and maybe it is, but it is also holy insight, the one thing that can change the world.