



F Post 9/30/74

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Judgement First, Then Pardon

By David Poling

The declaration by President Ford that Richard M. Nixon would receive a full, free, complete pardon for all acts related to his personal involvement in Watergate raised more problems than it solved.

The political fire-storm was a replay of earlier episodes involving the White House, former President Nixon and the men who gave America so many sleepless nights. The political drama will continue whenever the words pardon, clemency and amnesty now appear. However, there are some key theological suppositions that surround all these terms and must not be lost in the yearning to be nice to the former president.

Our society and the whole of Western civilization has been shaped by the Hebrew-Christian concepts of God's judgment and mercy. Whether we read deeply in the Old Testament Hebrew prophets or turn to the teachings of Jesus Christ, the belief in the need for forgiveness and reconciliation is central to Holy Scripture. In this special period of Jewish Holy Days, the need for soul-searching and confession before God for acts of wrong doing and omission are the heart of the Temple experience.

Within the Christian tradition one may turn to any of the liturgical orders of service (and President Ford knows personally the Book of Common Order used every sabbath in the Episcopal Church) and discover that Prayers of Confession ALWAYS precede words of comfort and assurance of forgiveness. Hence, the concern and the question: Is it theologically possible, and for Christians, proper, to forgive someone ahead of time, especially when guilt and wrongdoing are almost religiously denied? Former President Nixon has never said the words and through his family, indicates resolute denial of any serious moral failure in the Watergate mess.

President Ford claimed that Mr. Nixon had suffered enough, was in bad health and needed now more mercy than justice. A careful reading of the parable of the Prodigal Son as told by Jesus reveals a much different sequence, for the Father could only restore the Prodigal son AFTER he had returned home and been open and honest about his sin.

This United States is not a mean country, we are not an angry people. But justice and mercy cannot be switched around, for the order is in the direction. Judgment is built into our system just as it is forged for centuries into our religious convictions. Clemency and pardon follow convictions and that can never be reversed or erased.

But a deeper problem remains in the matter of Mr. Nixon. It is sadly but clearly demonstrated in the true story that is still told in the Kentucky mountains. A country preacher (in Boone County) got in trouble with a young girl in town. The deacons of the congregation confronted the pastor with the truth and shortly thereafter, fired him. "But wait," said my informant, "they didn't fire the preacher because he got into trouble with this young gal."

These were understanding, thoughtful people, not immune themselves from the temptations of life, sexual attractions, and times of moral collapse. They, like their pastor, were human beings living in the need of the grace of God. But what brought about the dismissal was the fact that their preacher LIED about the misconduct, refused to admit his guilt, and caused his own firing.

How can a congregation deal with a liar? When one confesses sin and seeks amendment of life — that's what the spiritual pilgrimage is all about. But when one denies the guilt and insists on innocence in a sinful situation, we are left with judgment but little chance for reconciliation and the full fruits of forgiveness. And forgiveness, even from the White House, is invalid when the pardon precedes judgment.