

February 23, 2009

Forgiveness

By Michael P. Brogan

I am typing a little slower than usual today. You see, my dog, Deputy Dog, bit me last night. It seems he was not happy with my decision for him to go with me to the basement while Ellen and I watched a movie. As I directed him down the stairs, he bared his teeth. Now, in the past, he would bare his teeth in a show of anger, but then just lick me while pretending to be viscous. Last night, as he bared his teeth, I dared him to give me a bite. He did! It is nothing serious, because he did, thank God, restrain his nip. It seems that I failed to take into account that he was scared of some sound and he is getting old. Like any of us getting up in age, sometimes you just do not want to put up with someone making us do what we do not want to do. He would have been content to show his disdain by baring his teeth, but I challenged him, as I have in the past, to “go ahead, give me a bite”.....he did! There was a little blood, but that was not what hurt. My dog, my companion, man’s best friend, turned on me. The proverbial biting the hand that feeds you, became literal.

As I was nursing my wounded hand I was mulling over the betrayal of Deputy Dog. I discounted entirely the fact that he is an animal guided by instinct. Although he is in reality the gentlest dogs I have ever known, his ability to reason is limited as well as his 13 year old patience. Even this gentle animal has his limits. However, just as fast as his nip, was his regret. He does not like to be in trouble. Whether he feels it or not, he is able to demonstrate an amazing level of contrition. Before I had time to put a band aid on my small cut, his sorrowful eyes were begging for forgiveness. He stayed a safe distance as I chastised him for his imprudent behavior, but not too far. Before long he was sliding his head under my hand in an attempt to comfort and to be comforted. And as always, after a short time, I forgave him. As soon as I gave him forgiveness, we both felt better. His tail wagged, and my hurt, (the one in my heart), stopped. That is what forgiveness is all about. It helps heal the forgiver sometimes even more than the one forgiven. There are times, however, that it is not easy to forgive. As a matter of fact, when someone does something wrong to me, it is my right, privilege and obligation to stay mad and hold a grudge. How dare they do that to ME! The grudge helps me teach my wrong doer a lesson. Deputy Dog has attempted to teach me that a grudge is not worth it. It wastes too much time. It prevents one from enjoying life. I like petting Deputy and he likes being petted. You can not pet a dog if you are holding a grudge.

Having a dog is a wonderful thing. If you have a dog, you understand this. If you do not, you should get one, really. It is a relationship that is based on symbiotic needs. Your dog depends on you for everything. He needs you to feed him, walk him, (yes, you pick up his poop), to see to his overall health and to love him. In return, you get to be needed. And your dog will teach you things. He will teach you about forgiveness; how good it is to forgive and how good it is to be forgiven.

The one regret that I do have, is that I waited too long to get our dog. My kids desperately wanted a dog. But selfishly, I put it off. I was dreading the work, expense and commitment that owning a dog entails. My brother Jim is a dog lover and the author of children's book about the love of a dog. He told me that if I did not get a dog soon, he was going to deliver one to my door. And he would have. So, when our son, Michael, was eight, and daughter was nine, Ellen and I started a serious conversation about the best dog for our family. I remember vividly, the instant that our decision to get a dog was made.

We were in the car, going to the movies. We were going to see "Michael" a movie where John Travolta plays an angel. The kids were in the back seat, and Ellen and I were discussing the pros and cons of the different dog breeds. Not thinking that the kids were even listening, we heard Michael say to no one in particular (and it brings a tear to my eye, even today)" I wouldn't care what kind of dog I got, I would love any dog".

Within a week, we had Deputy Dog. He was a tiny white fur ball. And along with his many needs and shedding coat, he brought a kind of love and laughter that was missing in our house. Deputy Dog did his part to teach lessons of care and responsibility to Erin and Michael, and lessons of forgiveness to me.

There are countless events of incredulity that I could relate. The book and movie, "Marley and Me, the Worlds Worst Dog", have nothing at all on life with Deputy Dog. For brevity I must focus on one situation, in addition to last night's episode.

On one occasion, while planning the night's dinner, I took a very large steak out of the freezer. I placed the steak in a location that anyone would agree would be safe, and went out. Upon returning, I did not notice the absence of the meat. Later on, however, I did notice a large, empty piece of plastic wrap on the kitchen floor. Although my police career did not include any time with the detective bureau, I quickly deduced that there had been a theft. Upon further investigation, it was confirmed that an entire FROZEN steak was taken and consumed by one very guilty Deputy Dog. His sloped ears, bent head and sad eyes gave him away. He knew that he did wrong. He showed a kind of satisfied sorrow for his behavior. He knows contrition well, or at least the appearance of contrition. There is a saying that it is easier to get forgiveness than permission. Deputy Dog lives by that saying. He was sorry...kind of. And he certainly wanted forgiveness. He really hates when anyone is mad at him. So, after a period of banishment, he begged for and received forgiveness. Still, if a steak, or a pork chop, or chicken is left frozen or unfroze, anywhere that is anyway possible to get at, Deputy Dog, will be asking for forgiveness, one more time. He is after all, a dog. And even though he seems more human than dog most of the time, he is a dog. I know that.

I also know that if we were ever stranded on a deserted island and all we had between the two of us was one lone Clark Bar, I would divide the Clark Bar and give Deputy Dog his fair share. On the other hand, if Deputy Dog was in charge of the Clark Bar, I would not be getting a share, fair or otherwise, from him. But, again, I know this. And it does not make me love him any less. I know him for what he is and that is okay.

Conversely, when Deputy Dog is neglected and I forget to walk him or feed him, he is fast to forgive. He does not hold a grudge. If I am late coming home, and it has been as long as 14 hours with no walk, he is just happy to see me. He goes out, takes care of business and I am forgiven. He never takes the time or energy to hold a grudge. He wants to get right back to the important part of the relationship, love. I have heard it said that when you seek revenge, dig two graves; One grave for your enemy and one for yourself. I try to take the example of forgiveness from Deputy Dog.

I think it prophetic that Deputy Dog should pick February 23 to bite me. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent. Lent is the season of forgiveness, something we all need to get and give. Sometimes I find it as difficult to feel forgiven as I find it to forgive. Unlike Deputy Dog, my behavior is not instinctive. I have the ability to reason. I know right from wrong and I still choose wrong on too many occasions. It is the Lenten Season that affords me the opportunity to concentrate on both forgiving and being forgiven. We are told by God that He loves us unconditionally and because of Jesus, we are able to be forgiven. That is truly remarkable and sometime for me hard to comprehend. The lessons that I learn from Deputy Dog do help to put this into some sort of prospectus.

So, as I change the bandage on my hand, I am reminded that we all have our limits, even a gentle but aging Deputy Dog. I make mistakes. I cause hurt, and pain, even to people (and dogs) that I love. Because of this, I need to be able to ask for forgiveness. When I am hurt I need the ability to forgive. This is not always easy. Lent is a good time to work on both. And even though Deputy Dog does not participate in any traditions of Lent, particularly fasting, he is a shining example of how to be forgiven and to forgive. And even if you do get an occasional nip, don't go through life without a dog.