

SCORES NOT WORTH KEEPING

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Genesis 37:3-11; 1 Corinthians 13

“Love...is not irritable or resentful.”

1 Corinthians 13:5

Well, this is the biggest day of the year for football fans. The Super Bowl. This year, an epic confrontation between the New England Patriots and the Los Angeles Rams.

Millions will be watching: but not only the action on the field. They'll also be keeping close track of the record of the action on the scoreboard. The TV network will make it easy. They'll display the score constantly at one corner of the screen.

Where would a football game be — where would *any* sporting event be — without the score? In the world of sports, keeping score is expected.

But that's not true of everything we do. It's especially not true of our intimate relationships: marriages, family bonds, deep friendships. Keeping score in those contexts — toting up all the times the other person has hurt us — can put great strain on those relationships.

That's what Paul has in mind when he writes to the Corinthians, “Love is not...irritable or resentful.” Now, Paul's not writing about marriage here — even though that 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians is the all-time favorite scripture passage

for weddings. He's writing to a church in conflict. But the principal's still the same. Love is love. Keeping score — accumulating an ever-increasing store of resentment, for hurts real or imagined — can be poisonous to the relationship.

When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that “Love is not...resentful,” the Greek word translated “resentful” is not one word at all. It's a phrase. Literally it means, “Love does not...count the bad,” or you could say, “Love does not keep an account of wrongs.”

The financial metaphor says a lot about how our minds operate, when we're in that mode of relating. It's very much like an account book: two columns, credits and debits. On the one side is a list of all the good things we think we've done for our friend or family member. On the other, all the bad things we recall them doing to us. The more time you and I spend hunched over our emotional account-books, toting up those columns of figures, the more we become obsessed with keeping our personal “bottom line” in the black. And the more we dwell on that accounting, the more we imagine we've got something to hold it over our partner's head.

Let me tell you a little story about some people who overcame the temptation to resentment. It's a true story, about a young Presbyterian by the name of Amy Biehl.¹

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amy_Biehl

I say it's a story about her, but it's really just as much about her family.

Amy grew up in the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Fe, New Mexico. She was active in that congregation. She was known especially as one of the best ringers in their bell choir.

Amy was also a very bright young woman. In the late 1980s, after graduating as valedictorian of her high school, she went off to study at Stanford University, where she was a member of the diving team.

While at college, Amy became passionately concerned about the *apartheid* system in South Africa. She won a Fulbright Scholarship to study at the University of the Western Cape, in Cape Town.

That's where Amy was on August 25, 1993 when she offered to drive a friend home to Gugulethu, one of the notorious "townships" where black South Africans were then forced to live under the *apartheid* laws.

Amy never made it to her friend's home. Gangs of angry black youths were wandering the streets that day, causing mayhem. They were throwing stones at delivery vehicles and at cars driven by white people. They toppled one delivery truck over and set it on fire.

The mob surrounded Amy's car and pulled her out of it. There, on the streets of Gugulethu, they stabbed and stoned her to death. Yes: stoned her to death. Sounds positively biblical, doesn't it? Amy was 26 years old.

Her death made absolutely no sense. The angry young people had no way of knowing that Amy was an activist who was on their side in the struggle — that the very reason she'd come to their country was to help them. In their blind rage, the only thing the mob noticed was the color of her skin.

That's the end of Amy's tragic story. But I told you the story isn't just about her. It's also about her parents, Linda and Peter Biehl.

Linda and Peter dealt with their grief by doing what they believed Amy would have wanted. They tried to understand the passion for justice that drove her life. They read up on South Africa. They also read her diaries, and learned from them how much she admired those who fought against racism.

The South African police arrived too late to save Amy, but they did arrest four of her murderers. Knowing that the trial would soon begin, the entire Biehl family — Linda, Peter and their three other children — decided that they had to go to South Africa.

Linda attended the trial of the murderers and watched them be sentenced to long prison terms. The entire family visited the street in Gugulethu where she died. They came to understand how dreadful the living conditions were in that grim place: how few jobs there were, and how little hope.

They felt their hearts softening. They came to the conclusion that, somehow, they had to forgive their daughter's killers.

Linda went into the home of one of the murderers and met with his mother. At the end of the visit, she found herself hugging her. Linda told a reporter later, “I walked out of that home. There was a rainbow in the sky. My heart was very light. I felt I had come to terms. And if that is forgiveness, I felt it. And I felt — you know, I felt — I *feel* at peace with myself. So to me, that’s forgiveness.”

To Peter and Linda, forgiveness was more than a fleeting feeling. They began spending time in Gugulethu. They established the Amy Biehl Foundation, which raised more than half a million dollars from people around the world who’d been touched by Amy’s story. Eventually the Foundation was funding more than 15 different social-services programs, everything from welding classes to after-school programs for young people. The 12-year-old sister of one of the murderers took part in the after-school program.

When the U.S. Ambassador showed up one day to dedicate a bronze plaque in Amy’s memory at the place where she’d died, Linda said she and her family were grateful for the gesture, but, as far as they were concerned, “The children of this community are our monument.”

Eventually, after Nelson Mandela was elected President, and *apartheid* came to an end, the legal case came under the oversight of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The Commission asked Linda

and Peter if they would have an objection to their daughter's murderers being considered for amnesty.

Mostly, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission cases were those of white South Africans — police officers and hardcore white-supremacists — who had tortured and killed black people. Amy's case was important to the Commission, because it was a crime of racial hatred committed by blacks against a white person.

The Biehls could have blocked the amnesty simply by objecting to it, but they decided not to. In 1998, five years after Amy's death, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission pardoned her murderers.

As they were being released, Peter Biehl shook each of their hands. He said this: "The most important vehicle of reconciliation is open and honest dialogue... we are here to reconcile a human life [that] was taken without an opportunity for dialogue. When we are finished with this process we must move forward with linked arms."

If there's a better example of love deciding not to keep score, I'm not aware of it. The story of Amy Biehl and her family is a sad one — but it's also very beautiful. I'm sure there was a time in their ordeal when Linda and Peter were very much keeping score. But eventually, they came to the point in their spiritual

journey, as Christians, that they were able to set aside their desire for revenge.

They were able to forgive.

There's a line from the letter to the Hebrews that speaks to this. Hebrews 12:15 says: **“See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled.”**

It's a different metaphor, but the same overall concept. Instead of a financial image — like the one from 1 Corinthians, keeping the account-book of wrongs — the author of Hebrews is using an agricultural metaphor. “See to it...that no root of bitterness springs up...”

It's like weeding a garden. You know how that goes, if you've ever tried your hand at growing beans or tomatoes. To thoroughly weed a garden, you can't just pinch off a weed at ground level. You've got to dig. You've got to get every last bit of root out of the ground. If you don't, before you know it, that weed will be back again.

The roots of some weeds can extend pretty far. I've got memories of pulling up some of those. It's as though the root were a long, stout piece of string, buried in the ground. You pull on it, and it just keeps coming. It can be astonishing how long and deeply dug-in some of those weedy roots can be!

It's the same way with our loving relationships. Allow resentment or bitterness to grow in that fertile soil, and before you know it, there's a very long root, running just beneath the surface of the ground, where no one can see it. But it's there — you can be sure of it! That persistent weed sucks all the moisture and nutrients out of the ground, starving the plant you and your loved one are trying to grow.

Scotland's national poet, Robbie Burns, has a famous poem called "Tam O'Shanter." Tam is the title character of this long and rambling poem. He's something of a ne'er-do-well. He spends a little too much time in the pub, does Tam. At one point, he's there at closing time, contemplating his long, lurching walk home. There he knows his long-suffering wife, Kate, is impatiently waiting, stewing in her own juices. He speaks these words to his drinking buddies, who are caught in a similar dilemma, in their own households:

**We think na on the lang Scots miles,
The mosses, waters, slaps, and styles,
That lie between us and our hame,
Whare sits our sulky, sullen dame,
Gathering her brows like gathering storm,
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.**

That line, "nursing her wrath to keep it warm," is to me a perfect description of resentment. Now, let me be clear about it: no one's excusing Tam's behavior. He's a scoundrel, no denying it. It's entirely appropriate, in dealing with an

addictive personality, to set up certain boundaries — to not tolerate manipulative behavior. But look at how Kate — the righteous one — is doing that. God knows she's got every right to be angry. But she can't leave it there. No, she's got to nurse her wrath, to carefully tend it, so she can deploy it at just the right time for maximum impact.

There's something delicious about resentment, isn't there? Something that leads us to cherish it, to hoard it, to tend it. Yet, isn't this precisely the sort of behavior that — in the long term — can truly undermine love?

Here's another vivid image. Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran minister from Denver, who until recently has been pastor of a very non-traditional church. Her Lutheran theology is traditional enough, but she ministers to a young congregation of all sorts of lost sheep. Many of them are misfits who don't feel welcome anywhere else. Nadia's a former standup comic and a recovering alcoholic, so that means she can come out with a fascinating turn of phrase.

One of the things Nadia's fond of saying is that “we're punished not for our sins but by our sins.” By this she means that, very often, sin is its own reward: but that reward is pretty dubious. With respect to resentment, Nadia had this to say in a newspaper interview:

“Harboring resentment instead of forgiving someone — that's like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies. That's its own

punishment, just like shopping at Wal-Mart is its own punishment. Being punished for your sins implies that God's going to wreak havoc on you, God has this score sheet, and if you go over a certain number, then God's going to make some horrible thing happen to you. God doesn't have to do that. We do it to ourselves. Good Lord! We create our own hell."²

Resentment is something we're inclined to cherish and nurture, like Tam O'Shanter's wife, Kate. But here's the thing: it doesn't really do us any good. It doesn't make us happier. Instead, it's very much like drinking that bottle of poison, in the hope that the poison will get to the other person before it gets to us. That's crazy: but that's resentment for you.

Love isn't always easy. At times it can be terribly hard: and among the hardest times of all is when God calls us to abandon our natural inclination to resentment, and to move on to forgiveness. The English poet William Blake once famously said this about our term of residence on this earth: "We are here to learn to endure the beams of love." The Christian novelist and humorist Anne Lamott had that particular remark in mind as she wrote these words:

"Earth is Forgiveness School. You might as well start at the dinner table. That way, you can do this work in comfortable pants. When Blake said that we are here to learn to endure the beams of love, he knew that your family would be an intimate part of this, even as you want to run screaming for your cute little

²Jesse James DeConto, "Why Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber Thinks Church Is For Losers," *Religion News Service; HuffPost Religion*, 10/04/2015.

life. But that you are up to it. You can do it, Cinderellie. You will be amazed.”³

Yes, you will. Yes, indeed. Try to practice, in your own life, a love free of resentment and richly seasoned by forgiveness. Believe me, you will not regret it.

Let us pray.

**Lord Jesus, remind us,
when we cherish memories of our own hurt
just a little too much,
and when we’re tempted to drink down
that scalding, poisonous brew of self-righteousness,
remind us that you could have done the same thing for us —
but that you chose to do otherwise:
that even on the cross you prayed,
“Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
Teach us to live — and to love —
as forgiven, forgiving people,
for your sake and for the sake of our loved ones. Amen.**

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³http://www.salon.com/2015/04/10/anne_lamott_shares_all_that_she_knows_everyone_is_scattered_up_broken_clingy_and_scared/