

A Book About Forgiveness

Colleagues,

In this week's ThTh post Marie Schroeder reviews a book about forgiveness. The author, Karl Boehmke, is a member of our Bethel Lutheran congregation here in St. Louis. The first draft of the manuscript was grist for the mill in our Sunday morning Adult Forum discussions. This is a pre-publication review. The book is officially "out" on Easter Sunday. If you can't wait till then, Karl has some copies at home.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

A. Karl Boehmke, FORGIVENESS: NEVER EASY / ALWAYS POSSIBLE.

Minneapolis: Two Harbors Press, 2010.

Paperback. xvii, 236p. \$14.95.

Picture it – a honeymooning second-marriage couple fearful of jeopardizing their second chance finds a haven in a storm, The Inn of Friendships Renewed. It turns out to be a small hotel offering a week-long program of Bible stories on forgiveness told by the owner and staff. The owner's name is Matthew Levi, and when he tells his New Testament stories the narrative is in the first person. Who is he really? Mystery abounds.

That's the story around the stories presented by nonagenarian A. Karl Boehmke in his first book, FORGIVENESS: NEVER EASY / ALWAYS POSSIBLE. Boehmke retells some 40 stories he's chosen from the many he researched in both testaments, and his retellings are lively, pertinent and thought-provoking. Starting with Jesus'

parable of the Wayward Son, the stories backtrack to cover incidents in the Old Testament you might not have thought of as displaying forgiveness – Cain and Abel, David and Bathsheba, Abraham and Lot. Some stories you have probably forgotten, such as the occasion when an invading Syrian army loses its way and heads straight for the Israelite camp, and the king of Israel, in obedience to the prophet Elisha's words, prepares a feast for them instead of a slaughter and after the meal sends them home in peace.

Further on we hear New Testament stories, and the joyful splashing surrounding John's baptizing of Jesus is worth the price of the book. Later stories center especially around Matthew Levi's first-person narratives of Jesus' teaching his disciples, Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection and how that all affected Jesus' followers.

In between we catch glimpses of the reactions of the couple who decide to stay the whole week. They begin to work through the painful divorces they have left behind and eventually discover how this forgiveness idea is the saving grace they need for their new life together.

Boehmke is a pastor through and through, and has served as such in Washington, Detroit, Rochester, Hong Kong, and the Air Force. He has doubtless loved Bible stories since he was a kid. It may well be that he wanted to learn more about them, the "what happened next?" sort of curiosity we may all experience. For Boehmke it was the stories having to do with forgiveness that intrigued him most. It's the heart of the Gospel, the heart so many find missing in their lives. And if the Bible gives only the bare outline, an eager mind will try to fill in the blanks. Boehmke succeeds better than many.

Yet this reviewer missed something here. All this talk of

forgiveness turns out not to be enough to guide the followers of Jesus into the future. Matthew Levi reflects that after Jesus' resurrection "Jesus had given us the keys of the Kingdom. Suddenly that commission was coming clear. The Holy Spirit would fill us with wisdom to distinguish right from wrong within the unfolding processes of history. The Torah could be understood as God intended: 'Love the Lord your God, love neighbor as yourself,' twin streams of divine revelation, like the early rains and late, blessing our land and nations beyond. 'Love as I have loved you,' would draw together again souls torn apart by human frailty." (p.217)

It seems that Matthew Levi has forgotten what his fellow evangelist John made perfectly clear. Namely, that "Love as I have loved you" is offered by Jesus as his NEW commandment—different from Moses's "Love God, love your neighbor as yourself." It's clearly different in the yardstick for measurement—"as you love yourself" vs. "as I have loved you." If Jesus himself is the new yardstick for love, then the Torah's double-love-commandment has been trumped with a better one. Isn't this where the Holy Spirit was leading the disciples?

Again, when the missionary Paul visits Matthew Levi's original inn in Shechem, he says he tells Jews and Gentiles alike that they can be friends with God again. "But what about the Torah?" Matthew Levi asks him. "These many cultures differ so drastically from our own Jewish ways." Paul replies, "They hear as their ears and the Holy Spirit allow them to hear. The big, bold Ten Commandments always stand up front. Beyond that, the Holy Spirit helps people work out laws for living together in each place..." (p.228-9)

Does this really sound like Paul? The Ten Commandments "always standing up front"? Is this the same Paul who more memorably said, for instance, "You have died to the law through the body

of Christ" (Rom.7:4), "you are not under law but under grace" (Rom.6:14), or even "we are discharged from the law." (Rom.7:6) One senses an argument from Matthew Levi here for the third use of the law, instead of the second use of the Gospel, and Thursday Theology readers may recall discussion on this topic often enough in former postings.

Nevertheless it's still a good read, and revisiting these stories of forgiveness can be helpful indeed.

On the same weekend when I finished Boehmke's book our St. Louis newspaper featured on the front page a remarkable story. A few years ago a teenager swiped a tip jar from a local Starbucks counter. Another man tried to stop him but fell outside on the parking lot and inadvertently the teenager's car ran over him. The man died two days later. Now 21 years old, having been convicted and having served his time in prison, this young man was invited by the relatives of the victim to return to that very parking lot to plant a tree in the victim's memory. Fearful, he did drive up from Atlanta with his father, not knowing what sort of reception he would find. Bitterness? Hatred? When they arrived, every member of the victim's family, even his brothers, hugged the young man and his father and said they were so glad they came. Tears flowed freely. Everyone there, including the young man, helped scatter the victim's ashes under the tree. "It's about reconciliation," said the father.

You'd think they might have been reading Boehmke's book.

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