

The man had said to me, "Let's have lunch!" I said, "Sure." So there we were, eating a fine meal. Then he told me his problem. He said, "I don't expect you to solve this. I just want to say this to you. I'm gay," he said. "I have a wonderful wife, 2 lovely children, but my wife has no idea what I do with other guys. I've got to tell someone; I can't tell her; she would never forgive me."

A teenager asked me once, "Is there any sin God won't forgive?" She was afraid she had gone out on a limb and it was too late to turn back. I still don't know what she had done.

The fear of never being forgiven is most haunting. You can stand back and say, "That's silly. Of course, you can always be forgiven." But unforgiveness is a part of life, not because it happens to us, but because we do it all the time. Did you get a bad haircut? "I'll never go back there again." Are parts for your car too hard to find? "I'll never buy another import." Did the waitress spill bean soup in your lap? "I'll never eat at that restaurant again." The free market is wonderful, but through it we practice unforgiveness.

The unforgivable sin at the time of Jesus was adultery. According to the scribes and pharisees the legal solution was to stone the adulterer. So people picked up rocks and prepared to throw them. It was permanent punishment for a clear sin. Which stone would you choose? A big angry one or a small nagging one?

They bring this woman to Jesus. He had spent the night on the Mount of Olives in prayer. She had spent the night in the bed of a married man. He had sat down to teach; she was made to stand in shame.

Let me tell you something about this story. For 800 years after the death of Jesus half the Church never accepted this story as part of the Bible. To this day some of your Bibles at home will begin chapter 8 of John's Gospel with verse 12, not with verse 1. They just drop this story.

Why? One theory is that this story is too good to be true. Jesus is too radical here; he forgives the unforgivable sin. And further, he forgives it before the sinner repents. He forgives the unforgivable sin before the sinner repents. It's too much. We know God is loving, but what's going on here?

What's going on is Jesus calls the sinner's bluff. Like my friend at lunch, we sometimes won't confess our sins because we're afraid somebody won't forgive us if we do--a spouse, a friend, or God. "If I tell them the truth, they'll never forgive me." Jesus says, "OK, I'll call your bluff. I'll forgive you first, before you repent. Now the ball's in your court." He squats down to draw idly in the sand and wait.

So here we stand. Jesus has given us some incredible news. He's willing to forgive us no matter what we've done. So now, what? Do I tell my sin to someone? Do I resolve never to sin this way again? Do I forgive someone else whose sin is remarkably like mine? Is it time to put down our stones and forgive the unforgivable sin?