

Diane Jones, member of Fourth Presbyterian Church, recently completed her Master's degree in Humanities at Hood College. While there, Diane explored Christian elements in her studies of various authors. Below is the second in her series entitled "The Fingerprints of God" in which Diane considers the Christian dimension in Shakespeare's A Winter's Tale and The Tempest.

**A Winter's Tale and the Tempest:
A Universally Christian View of Forgiveness and Restoration**
Diane C. Jones

When a man or woman grievously wrongs another, perhaps as the result of a jealous rage, perhaps as a greedy power-grab, especially if the wrong results in the death of the victim's loved one, punishment seems appropriate: the offender gets what he deserves, as Paul's letter to the Romans plainly states, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). In two of his romances, *The Winter's Tale* (1610-11) and *The Tempest* (1611-12), Shakespeare pens stories that invite comparison, each with a character who wrongs another and deserves punishment, but who is granted forgiveness by the victim. It is the quality of forgiveness that turns tragedy into redemption. *The Winter's Tale* is a redemption story with a Catholic fingerprint on it, and *The Tempest* is a redemption story with a Protestant fingerprint; taken together the plays present a universally Christian view of forgiveness and restoration.

Shakespeare shows his audience how fast sin can take hold of a man's thoughts in *The Winter's Tale*. Leontes is stricken with jealousy in act 1 scene 2: "To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods...Mamillius, /Art thou my boy?" (140, 150-51). He imagines that his wife, Hermione, is flirting with his best friend, Polixones, and within minutes that thought turns to being convinced that she is carrying Polixones's child:

*Away with him, and let her sport herself
With that she's big with, (to Hermione) for 'tis Polixones
Has made thee swell thus. (2.1.75-78)*

As if he had not taken this idea far enough, he even wonders if his son, Mamillius is his own. Despite protestation from his advisors and courtiers, Leontes plots to poison Polixones, and he throws Hermione in jail. At the height of his crazed jealousy, Leontes will not look at his newborn daughter, nor even use a feminine pronoun when speaking of her-- and he orders Antigonus to take the infant and leave her to die:

*This brat is none of mine
It is the issue of Polixones.
Hence with it, and together with the dam
Commit them to the fire. (2.3.119-123)*

When the oracle at Delphi confirms Hermione's innocence, Leontes declares that the oracle is wrong. It is only after the sudden death of Mamillius and learning that Hermione, too, has died, that Leontes's eyes are opened to his grievous error. Paulina is a vehicle of confrontation for him, and she pulls no punches:

*Thy tyranny
 Together working with thy jealousies,
 Fancies too weak for boys, too green and idle
 For girls of nine, O, think what they have done
 And then run mad indeed, stark mad! for all
 Thy by-gone fooleries were but spices of it.
 That thou betray'dst Polixenes, 'twas nothing;
 That did but show thee, of a fool, inconstant
 And damnable ingrateful: nor was't much,
 Thou wouldst have poison'd good Camillo's honour,
 To have him kill a king: poor trespasses,
 More monstrous standing by: whereof I reckon
 The casting forth to crows thy baby-daughter
 To be or none or little; though a devil
 Would have shed water out of fire ere done't:
 Nor is't directly laid to thee, the death
 Of the young prince, whose honourable thoughts,
 Thoughts high for one so tender, cleft the heart
 That could conceive a gross and foolish sire
 Blemish'd his gracious dam: this is not, no,
 Laid to thy answer: but the last,--O lords,
 When I have said, cry 'woe!' the queen, the queen,
 The sweet'st, dear'st creature's dead... (3.2.199-220)*

Leontes sincerely repents (“The causes of their death appear, unto/ Our shame perpetual. Once a day I'll visit/ The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there/ Shall be my recreation” (3.2.262-266) , and for the duration of the play expresses sorrow for his sin (“I have done sin” 5.1.212; “I am ashamed” 5.3.43;), and even does penance (“Sir, you have done enough, and have perform'd/ A saint-like sorrow: no fault could you make./ Which you have not redeem'd; indeed, paid down/ More penitence than done trespass: at the last;” 5.1.1-4) as an outward sign of his repentance.

After 16 years of grief and penance for the sin which caused the loss of his son, wife and daughter, Leontes is forgiven by a (perhaps metaphorically) raised Hermione (she's warm!/ If this be magic, let it be an art/ Lawful as eating” 5.3.136-138). All, except, sadly, Mamillius, is restored to him, and so because of the finality of Mamillius's death, Leontes will always have a reminder of his past sin, just as Jacob always walked with a limp after wrestling with God (see Genesis 32:22-32).

In *The Tempest* we see, not a sinner who acknowledges his sin and does penance, but the victim of the sin deliberately seeking the sinner and bringing him to a place where he can repent and be restored. Alonso had deposed Prospero from his throne, setting Antonio there, and allowed Prospero to be set adrift with his young daughter, with no food, in an old, leaky vessel, assuring their deaths. 13 years go by, and Alonso finds himself on a ship, with, among others, his brother, Sebastian, his son, Ferdinand, Prospero's brother

Antonio, and Gonzalo, who is described as a ‘good, old counselor,’ having just taken his only daughter, Claribel, to Tunis for her marriage to the Tunisian king. Prospero causes a tempest which breaks up the ship, scatters the passengers, and washes them all up on the shores of the island on which Prospero has been living. In a revenge tragedy such as *Hamlet* we might see Prospero in acts 2-5 reeking revenge on his enemies one by one. But Shakespeare, in the last play written entirely himself (folgershakespearelibrary.edu), shows Alonso, not getting what he deserves, but getting what he *doesn't* deserve: the grace of forgiveness.

Alexander Pope’s familiar, perhaps overly familiar, adage “To err is human, to forgive, divine” plays out in glorious splendor here, but first we must establish Prospero as a metaphorically divine character. Many things he does are God-like. He can cause storms, as the God of the Bible does many times in Genesis alone (Here we can especially think about the Great Flood in Genesis 7), and he can quiet storms, just as Jesus quieted the seas (see Matthew 8:23-27 and Mark 4:35-41). Prospero is able to create out of nothing (garments and tables of food; see Genesis 1), he is able to cause sleep as well as temporary paralysis. He is able to send out an angel, of sorts, in the form of Ariel, to pronounce his judgments. Best of all, he is able to forgive and restore.

Prospero seems to know that repentance is born out of sorrow for sin, and so he sets up those perfect circumstances to prepare Alonso. In a similar way as Leontes, Alonso needs to lose his son in order to experience the grief for his sin. He is aware that he cannot find Ferdinand after the shipwreck, but he has the added weight of his brother’s reminder that the shipwreck and Ferdinand’s drowning is Alonso’s fault (“Sir, you may thank yourself for this great loss” 2.1.131; “The fault’s your own” 2.1.145). He feels it keenly, and tries to push it out of his mind: “I wish mine eyes/ Would with themselves shut up my thoughts. I find/ They are inclined to do so” (2.1.208-210). Every waking minute must be spent looking for Ferdinand (“Leave off this ground, and let’s make further search for my lost son.” 2.1.326-327). But in 3.3 he is hopeless that he will ever find his son alive. He describes himself as “attach’d with weariness/ To the dulling of my spirits... He is drowned...well, let him go (3.3.7,8,10, 12). Antonio confirms this hopelessness, spelling it out in no uncertain terms, “I am right glad that he is out of hope” (3.3.13).

Alonso’s grief at the loss of his son prepares him for the grief of his sin—the sin of deposing and, in his mind, killing Prospero and Miranda. Ariel leads Alonso and his companions to a sumptuous banquet table, which, according to Hunter, represents the table of Holy Communion (Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*, 234), which is only available to Christians who have prepared themselves, as Paul urges:

Wherefore, whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink the cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. Let every man therefore examine himself, and so let them eat of this bread, and drink of this cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh his own damnation, because he discerneth not the Lord’s body. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29)

As the four approach the table, it is removed—it vanishes instantly—because three of them are unworthy. Ariel addresses them, “You are three men of sin...” (Gonzalo is not a

man of sin, but is a good and righteous man, therefore he is not addressed). Ariel goes on to remind them of how they wronged Prospero years ago and that ‘powers’ have not forgotten. In another reminder that he is at fault for the loss of his son, Alonso is told “Thee of thy son, Alonso,/ They have bereft; and do pronounce by me/ Lingered perdition” (3.3.94-96). The banquet scene, with Ariel’s pronouncement of guilt, is an illustration of what Christians call ‘the conviction of sin’ (see Acts 17:11 and 1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Because of Ariel’s pronouncement of guilt, Alonso is ready to repent: literally ‘change one’s mind’ or ‘feel contrition (OED), which he does in a monologue in lines 116-124.

*O, it is Oh, it is monstrous, monstrous.
Methought the billows spoke and told me of it,
The winds did sing it to me, and the thunder,
That deep and dreadful organ pipe, pronounced
The name of Prosper. It did bass my trespass.
Therefore my son i' th' ooze is bedded, and
'll seek him deeper than e'er plummet sounded
And with him there lie mudded.*

The depth of the sorrow that Alonso feels can be heard in words like ‘monstrous,’ ‘deep and dreadful’ and ‘trespass,’ a word that would immediately bring the Bible to the minds of Shakespeare’s audience, for the word ‘trespass’ appears in the 1599 Geneva Bible 106 times (biblegateway.com). Ferdinand is buried deep in the ooze and mud, and Alonso must join him—could David’s reference to a sinner being a ‘worm’ in Psalm 22:6 (“But I am a worm, and not a man: a shame of men, and the contempt of the people”) be in Alonso’s mind here? He is overwhelmed with sorrow as he connects his sin against Prospero with the loss of his son.

In act 5 Prospero shows another God-like quality as he and Ariel meet, and Prospero expresses concern for how the men are doing since their confrontation: “How fares the King and ‘s followers?” (8). Ariel tells him about their ‘tears’ ‘mourning’ and ‘sorrow,’ and continues,

*The king,
His brother, and yours, abide all three distracted,
And the remainder mourning over them,
Brimful of sorrow and dismay. But chiefly
Him that you termed, sir, “the good old Lord Gonzalo,”
His tears run down his beard like winter’s drops
From eaves of reeds. Your charm so strongly works ‘em
That if you now beheld them, your affections
Would become tender. (5.1.14-24)*

Prospero realizes now that the men are ready to be forgiven—and he is ready to forgive: “Yet with nobler reason against my fury/ Do I take part. The rarer action is/ In virtue than in vengeance” (32-34). And that is Shakespeare’s thesis. Truly it is a rare action to

employ the virtue of forgiveness, and plainly, simply, he says in line 88 (and this to his unrepentant brother Antonio), “I do forgive thee.”

One might think that the play could end here, and Prospero could be deemed magnanimous, for this forgiveness is a grace which the men did not deserve. But Prospero, God-like, goes even further (the second mile, so to speak): he restores Ferdinand to Alonso—nay, he resurrects him and brings about a reunion that Alonso could not even dream to hope for, just as Paulina brings Hermione back to life for Leontes. But Prospero is not done blessing: he gives Alonso a new daughter (in-law). An hour earlier Alonso saw himself stranded on a deserted island, never to see his daughter again, and son drowned-- and through the device of dramatic irony the audience knows that things are worse for Alonso than he imagines: his murder is being plotted by his brother and his friend. But even while all is lost, and he is stuck fast in despair, Prospero is behind the scenes working to bring about his repentance and the restoration of all he holds dear. Alonso has the added blessing of the promise of seeing his beloved son happily married to the sweet daughter of the rightful Duke of Milan.

How do *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* compare? In both, the men who are in need of grace lose a son, and their loss readies them for repentance. Both men repent genuinely, and through that repentance have loved ones restored to them. In both plays the ending is blissful, with reconciliations and weddings which bring two fractured families together.

The plays differ too, however. In *The Winter's Tale* Leontes spends 16 years proving his repentance before a wife and daughter are restored to him. In *The Tempest* a God-like Prospero draws Alonso to him and gives him all that he needs to bring about repentance. The grace given to Leontes is a direct result of experiencing loss due to his sin and his ability to connect those dots. Alonso, on the other hand, experiences the unmerited favor of a metaphoric God who is actively seeking him. In *The Winter's Tale* the story of sin, repentance, penance and restoration is a very Catholic one. In *The Tempest* the story of a God-like character aggressively seeking a straying sinner, choosing him, and bringing about his repentance is a reformed Protestant one. Taken together the plays represent Christian grace in a universal, catholic way, a way that is expressed in these elements of The Apostles Creed, “I believe in...the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”

Amen.