

Forgiveness: The Freedom to Be at Peace

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Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, but forgiveness changes the way we remember. When we forgive our parents for their divorce, our children for their lack of attention, our friends for their unfaithfulness in crisis, our doctors for their ill advice, we no longer have to experience ourselves as the victims of events over which we had no control. The only people we can really change are ourselves.

Forgiving is first and foremost the healing of our own hearts.

~ Henri J. M. Nouwen, Bread for the Journey

Forgiveness is needed at two levels: first that I am forgiven, which frees me from my guilt; and secondly, that I forgive which frees me from my anger.

Unless we forgive, we cannot be free.

~ Esther de Waal, Living with Contradiction: An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality

WELCOME - Bruce Epperly, a Professor at Wesley Theological Seminary, began his presentation on Spiritual Practice and Healing with this statement, "Any credible theology must address issues of healing and forgiveness." I wrote it down in my notebook like good students do. I also apparently copied it onto a small scrap of paper with bright red ink and it fell out of an older folder I opened this week, as I was looking for something else. It's a good statement, not only about theology, but also about churches and spirituality. So our theme this month is "The Mending Circle," and today we're going to address some of the issues of forgiveness.

Now I want you to pay attention to what comes to your mind when you hear that word forgiveness. Often we immediately think of the most difficult interaction we've ever had in forgiving someone else or in being forgiven or in forgiving ourselves? Often, when we hear the word forgiveness, we picture the one person, the one situation, in our lives, where forgiveness seems impossible?

During the Prelude, I invite you to forget about the hard cases of forgiveness in your life and focus instead on the good experiences you have had with forgiveness. Remember a wonderful moment when someone graciously forgave you for something you did. Think of a time when someone said to you, "I'm sorry" and you responded with kindness and understanding. Think of the people you love who forgive you often and well. Let those memories and those experiences guide your reflections.

READINGS AND SCRIPTURE

Luke 6: 37 – Forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap: for the measure you give will be the measure you receive.

Matthew 18: 22 – At that point, Peter asked Jesus, "How many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?" Jesus replied, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven."

A Little Book of Forgiveness by D. Patrick Miller - Jews and Arabs hating each other, whites and blacks, Christians and Muslims, left and right – there is no reason or dignity to any of it. Every chronic hatred began when someone attacked, someone suffered, and no one forgave. Then these examples were multiplied and unwisely taught down through the generations, falsely ennobled in lies and in tales of crusades, uprisings, and martyrdom. But the cycle of vengeance will never solve itself. Someone has to step outside of the cycle and courageously say, “I will take no pride in my tradition as long as it teaches revenge instead of forgiveness.”

Psalm 130 – *as translated by Stephen Mitchell*

Out of the depths, God, I call to you:

Let me feel your presence, even in this darkness.

Take away my affliction or give me the strength to endure.

If all our mistakes were indelible, which of us could survive?

But you have forgiven us, even when we cannot forgive ourselves.

And that is the wonder and the dread – *as translated by Norman Fischer*

SERMON

At the end of each summer, we have a worship service called “Ask the Pastor,” where members of the congregation write down questions they have about spirituality, faith and the church, and Larry and I take turns answering as many of these questions as we can in 20 minutes. Every time we have the “Ask the Pastor” service, without fail, there are several questions about forgiveness, which tells me that this is an issue we carry in our minds and in our hearts. Forgiveness is a deeply-held religious value in Judaism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, yet as C.S. Lewis said, “Everyone believes in forgiveness until he has something to forgive.” Genuine forgiveness can be astonishingly difficult because it takes place only in the context of pain, whether it be forgiveness of others, self-forgiveness, or divine forgiveness.

This morning, I want to share with you some things I have learned about forgiveness. I believe that any credible discussion about forgiveness needs a prelude about what forgiveness is **not**. Forgiveness is not about tolerating unacceptable behavior, such as abuse of any kind, such as incest or rape, addiction, violence or murder. Forgiveness does not mean that I need to stay in a relationship or in a situation where I or someone else will be physically or emotionally battered. While forgiveness is about relinquishing our resentment and our revenge, forgiveness is not about relinquishing our ethics.

So, here’s my list of fourteen things I’ve learned about forgiveness:

1. Forgiveness is a process of intention. It happens over time, and only I, the person directly involved, can determine the time frame. Healing follows its own order and timing. What is important is my intentional commitment to forgive or to seek forgiveness.
2. Forgiveness must not be forced, but it can be practiced. As I said earlier, it is important to begin with the easier situations, not the most difficult ones. Forgiveness when practiced becomes a way of life, a way of seeing yourself,

- and others, and the world through different eyes, knowing that we are all human, and therefore we are all in need, at times, of forgiveness.
3. Forgiveness is the oil for the engine of life. As an engine cannot run without oil because its parts will grind upon one another and destroy the machine, so human relationships cannot survive without the oil of forgiveness. Forgiveness reduces the friction that builds up between us, and it heals the places where we get burned by one another. We all know how easily, often inadvertently, and sometimes inevitably, we hurt one another in the daily moments of our lives. I'm sure you can think of a recent example in your life, maybe even from the Christmas holidays! In the ordinary ebb and flow of life's routines – in marriages and families, in friendships, in spiritual community, at work and play – "*I'm sorry*" is the password that releases the oil, the balm, of forgiveness. If things are more tense, words like "*I'm truly sorry*" – "*I've learned that*" – "*are you ok*" – "*are we ok*" – "*where can we go from here?*" are good to use.
 4. Forgiveness needs to happen between the affected people in a specific situation. While the sit-com *Seinfeld* celebrates the holiday of Festivus with an annual "Airing of Grievances", during which each person reveals how everyone else has wronged him or her over the past year, I generally don't recommend that as helpful! Forgiveness is about one person apologizing, without defensive excuses, with the expectation that the other person will listen and accept the apology, and that together they will then find ways to move on. To forgive is to give oneself, and others, permission to change, permission to go toward the future.
 5. What has long been acknowledged in spiritual practice about the importance of forgiveness is now being confirmed in health and medicine. Being a forgiving person actually helps you live longer and be healthier. Psychologist Loren Toussaint's national survey in 2001 found that people who could forgive others had a better overall mental and physical health than people who did not forgive – and that correlation increases as people age. So, when you forgive someone, instead of thinking that you are doing them a favor, remember that you are healing yourself.
 6. To refuse to forgive is often called nursing a grudge. It's like feeding our hatred from the very milk of our well-being. It is like my drinking a cup of poison and then being surprised that it kills **me** rather than the person I am angry with. Or, as Buddhism teaches, "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intention of throwing it at someone else and discovering that you are the one who gets burned."
 7. Cardiologist Douglas Russell, in his research, has found that the inability to forgive oneself is even more toxic to your health than hanging onto anger against someone else. Forgiving myself can be harder than forgiving someone else. I grew up hearing that "*Sorry doesn't help*", whenever I broke something, spilled something, or did something wrong. Well, my friends, if sorry doesn't help in these situations, what does? So I became, as much as possible, a very, very good little girl. The cost was that I lived in fear of doing something wrong,

which meant that I didn't take risks, I narrowed my world, I covered up a lot, and when I made a mistake, I didn't know how to forgive myself. I was very lucky when I married Larry, a man who doesn't need to find blame, or to hold onto anger, or to turn down apologies. It took me a long time to learn that I could count on that, and over time, that acceptance has given me permission to forgive myself more easily. It doesn't mean I don't acknowledge my flaws and failures. It does mean that instead of endlessly beating myself up about them, I pay attention to what they can tell me about myself and about the places where I need healing and change.

8. What about the times when life raises the bar on forgiveness? How do I forgive someone who has done real harm to me? How do I move on when someone will not forgive me? And, when I have done something truly awful, how do I forgive myself then? I have been in each of these places, learning how to forgive my father even after he died, dealing with the end of a friendship where nothing I can do is allowed to bridge the rift, having done things myself that have caused pain to my children.
9. When someone will not forgive me or have any contact with me, or when someone has done me such harm that I cannot directly engage them, one thing I can do is create my own reconciliation process, remembering that forgiveness is ultimately about the healing of my own heart. If I truly want to heal this hurt, this pain, this shame, I can work with the situation, perhaps with a trusted friend or counselor, looking again carefully at what happened.
10. If the forgiveness needed is in the context of a close relationship, then acknowledging my part in the situation is crucial. I've watched people go through divorces, even in the most difficult of circumstances and betrayals, who are able to get through the divorce and afterwards move on, because they could eventually acknowledge not only what had happened but also their own flaws, and really learn from the whole experience. On the other hand, I've watched other people who during, and for years after, their divorce, remained locked in bitterness and recriminations, because they could never acknowledge their own part.
11. After I have acknowledged what has happened, and, if appropriate, my part in it, then I picture silently what is to be forgiven and hold it in light – no words – just light. I do just that, over and over again. Then, when I am ready, I add the words "I release you – I release this situation from the grip of my pain, from my sadness, from my condemnation." I keep at it, with the image, with the words "I release this", again and again until the words become true, and I do release the person, release the grievance, release myself, whether that takes weeks or months or years. The Buddhist practice of *Tonglen* is very similar to this; I recommend Pema Chodron as an excellent resource for this practice.
12. Sometimes, in difficult situations of remorse, there may be a need for penance, for restitution. And we may need to find a way to offer that. I was so moved by Michael Broas, a Vietnam veteran, who gave a seminar here last Sunday about his return to Vietnam this fall. He went there with four other Vietnam

vets; each of them had done things they deeply regretted, things that hurt and killed many people. As they went back to the very places of harm, they expressed their sorrow, their remorse, to Vietnamese children and adults, to Vietnamese monks, to victims of Agent Orange. It was a journey of repentance and healing, as these Vietnamese people accepted the soldiers' apologies with a gracious kindness and a generous forgiveness, telling these American veterans to return to their homes and live their lives well. (For more on this issue of restitution, I invite you to be here for Larry's sermon on this topic, called "Rehabilitating Penitence" on Sunday March 9)

13. Finally, in those times when we run into a concrete wall where human forgiveness does not seem possible or enough, never underestimate the power of the Divine. Instead of assuming that God cannot forgive, ask for forgiveness. Instead of assuming that prayer cannot help, pray and meditate, asking for healing and transformation. There are times when we cannot forgive or heal alone, by our own power or by our own actions. In those times, we may need that ancient ritual of confession, of lifting up of our grudges and our failures to God, and of seeking pardon.
14. I love the translation of Psalm 130 that is printed in your bulletin. I read it often when I need to forgive or be forgiven. "Out of the depths, God, I call to you. Let me feel your presence, even in this darkness. If all our mistakes were indelible, which of us could survive? But You have forgiven us, even when we cannot forgive ourselves." And then there is that one extra line, by Norman Fischer, from his book A Zen-Inspired Translation of the Psalms. "You have forgiven us, even when we cannot forgive ourselves and that is the wonder and the dread." What an interesting twist! The wonder is of forgiveness is evident, but what is the dread? Why would I dread being forgiven? I would dread it because there is a hidden cost (price,?) of forgiveness. If I truly forgive someone else, I have to give up my grievance; I have to let go of my old strangely comforting stories about how I was wronged and how I suffered. If I am truly forgiven, I have to live with a new freedom as well as a new responsibility to change, to become the person I forgiven to be, the person I am called to be.

Ultimately, forgiveness can call forth change beyond our imagining, for it means letting go of what has bound us, letting go of what is in the past and limiting, soaring instead into the light of the future, of amazing possibilities.

CALL TO PRAYER – Forgiveness is a process that ... is fundamentally for your own sake, a way to carry the pain of the past no longer. The fate of the person who harmed you, whether they be alive or dead, does not matter nearly as much as what you carry in your own heart.

And, if the forgiveness is for yourself, for your own guilt, for the harm you have done to yourself or to another, the process is the same. You will come to realize that you can carry it no longer. ~ *Jack Kornfield, A Path With Heart*

CHANT - #31 in tan songbook – "Humble Thyself" – sing three times

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader - Merciful God, I confess my brokenness and I pray:
For the things I have done that I regret,

People - Forgive me;

Leader - For the things I have failed to do that I regret,

People - Forgive me;

Leader - For the times I have over-reacted in anger or nursed my anger
in cold withdrawal,

People - Forgive me;

Leader - For the pain I have caused to others and for the pain I have
inflicted on myself

People - Forgive me.

SILENT PRAYER

UNISON WORDS OF ASSURANCE

May we trust your promise, O God, that when we turn around toward You, You are there, with open arms of forgiveness. May we take this forgiveness seriously, as the chance to begin again and the freedom to be at peace with ourselves and with others. May we express our gratitude by living our lives with compassion, with generosity and with wisdom. Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GOING DEEPER – Resources I have found helpful and also used for this sermon.

- Marc Ian Barasch, a psychologist, and documentary film producer, [Field Notes on the Compassionate Life: A Search for the Soul of Kindness](#), specifically the chapter on "The Elixir of Forgiveness"
- Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun and writer, [The Places that Scare You](#) and [When Things Fall Apart](#)
- Jack Kornfield, a Buddhist monk and writer, [A Path With Heart](#)
- Tehila Lieberman, a Jewish writer, "The Way Back," in [A Woman's Path](#)
- D. Patrick Miller, a writer on issues of human consciousness, [A Little Book of Forgiveness](#)
- Flora Slosson Wuellner, a UCC minister and a Christian Professor at Pacific School of Religion, [Release](#), specifically the chapter on Spiritual Recovery, Restoration and Renewal

