

Why Forgiveness?

February 18, 2024

A Run-of-the-Mill Story

Some of my favorite memories of seminary were of my classmates. I went to seminary straight out of my undergrad at St. Norbert, an experience I wouldn't call sheltered...but okay, yeah, it was sheltered. I remember that one of my great fantasies in moving to Chicago from Green Bay was that I was looking forward to finding a coffee shop that was open past 9 p.m. Turns out that, at least in the mid '90s, coffee shops in Chicago closed at 9 p.m., too. There were 24-hour diners, but coffee shops were another matter.

My school had a building of studio apartments just for theology students, that were 15'x15'. They were so tiny that you had to walk through the closet to get to the bathroom, but coming straight from my undergrad, I was ecstatic to not have to share a bathroom. Because of the cramped space, the building created instant community. There were always people gathering in the lobby, and because there was so little room for stuff, the TV lounge was hopping.

Remember, this was the '90s, so Thursday night TV was a particular draw. It was probably inevitable that one fellow and I hit it off. We didn't have a ton in common – he was from Virginia, had taken a couple of years off after doing a degree in biology – but as the two youngest people in the building by a decade, we quickly became inseparable.

For two years, we spent 80% of our waking time together. We would go to class, go to our respective jobs, help each other get ready for dates (he was gay, so we never went down that alley), but other than that, we were together. That is, until a great blow up late in our second year.

Twenty-five years later, I don't even remember tension building leading up to the great blowup, but oh, how I remember the fight, and I remember the hurt and pain and the loss and even grief that followed. We said ugly things. We were cruel. And for a year, a whole year, we didn't talk.

Now remember the picture I had painted of our relationship before then. We'd been each other's world. In some ways, it felt like a divorce. He got the TV lounge. I got the coffee shop. Because of what was said, at first neither of us were willing to forgive. We both held fiercely to our hurt, nursing it like a baby.

Then, one foggy Holy Week, we were the last people on campus together. Being a school for ministry, everyone else either had congregations they were responsible for or had gotten out of Dodge. We bumped into each other in the grocery store, each with an individual portion of meat and veg and beverage, sad as the other shoppers hefted great carts full of holiday hopefulness, and somehow, we let down our guards and allowed one another to be human to each other again. We, who had been nurturing the hurt for over a year, chose to step off of that hamster wheel, and allow for a different narrative.

We walked home together, talked, cooked, stayed up way too late. It was only after hours and hours that we even touched on the elephant in the room: the hurt that we had caused each other. But, over time, we would name it and eventually come to tell the story differently. Choosing healing over pain became a vehicle of resurrection; a friendship that had been dead rose to new life.

The Forgiveness Project

I share this story, not because of its profundity, but because it is so run-of-the-mill. All of us have hurt people over the years. All of us have been hurt. And as we step off into our Lenten series on forgiveness, I think it's important to remember that forgiveness comes in big and small packages. I'm working with materials from the Forgiveness Project all season.

Next Sunday, we'll host the opening of the F Word exhibit in our church hall, an art installation that will be in the church hall for three weeks which chronicles 18 people's profound experiences of forgiveness. But as I was praying with their materials, it struck me that so much of what is written about forgiveness is about huge wrongs – murder and rape and violence and genocide – which frankly, most of us will never encounter head-on. But that doesn't mean that forgiveness isn't relevant because most of us will deal with falling out with a sibling, a neighbor, or a co-worker.

So, let's start out with what forgiveness is. According to the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley:

Psychologists generally define forgiveness as a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness.

Just as important as defining what forgiveness is, though, is understanding what forgiveness is not. Experts who study or teach forgiveness make clear that when you forgive, you do not gloss over or deny the seriousness of an offense against you. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, nor does it mean condoning or excusing offenses. Though forgiveness can help repair a damaged relationship, it doesn't obligate you to reconcile with the person who harmed you, or release them from legal accountability.

Instead, forgiveness brings the forgiver peace of mind and frees them from corrosive anger. While there is some debate over whether true forgiveness requires positive feelings toward the offender, experts agree that it at least involves letting go of deeply held negative feelings. In that way, it empowers you to recognize the pain you suffered without letting that pain define you, enabling you to heal and move on with your life.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is probably one of the best-known artisans of forgiveness in our lifetime. The last of our Sunday night movie series for this year is based on his experience leading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa at the end of the brutal Apartheid regime. Tutu came to recognize what he called “the Revenge Cycle v. the Forgiveness Cycle.” Picture a clock face. The hurt that has been perpetrated is at the 3 o'clock spot. Going clockwise, the revenge cycle starts with harm or hurt or loss then cycles through to pain, choosing to hold on to harm, rejecting shared humanity, revenge/retaliation/payback, violence and cruelty.

Each of those steps could probably use an hour of unpacking themselves, but for today's purposes, I'd like to lift up that movement between choosing to hold on to harm and rejecting shared humanity. That's what's at the core of the atrocities happening in the Middle East right

now, is it not? To be honest, that's what was at the core of the falling out between me and my friend.

In Archbishop Tutu's work, he learned that when we hold on to hurt it is the human experience to dehumanize the other. This is what the founder of the forgiveness project recognized. She was a journalist, covering international news and seeing humanity at its worst. She founded the Forgiveness Project because she saw that getting out of this Revenge Cycle is the only way the human race is going to move forward, indeed critical to our continued existence. What's more, as a people of faith, as a community that centers our belief on the notion that everyone, EVERYONE, is beloved by God, dehumanization is antithetical to who we are and what we are called to be.

So if the Revenge Cycle is a clock with hurt at 3 o'clock which then cycles through to pain, choosing to hold on to harm, rejecting shared humanity, and then revenge/retaliation/payback, which can lead to violence and cruelty, the Forgiveness Cycle starts with hurt or harm or loss at that same spot, but instead of cycling clockwise and choosing to hold on to harm, the Forgiveness Cycle loops counterclockwise when one chooses healing.

Tutu's experience of receiving thousands of stories of both revenge and forgiveness is that the healing starts with telling the story, moves to naming the hurt, which in turn results in recognizing shared humanity, granting forgiveness, which then leads to either renewing or releasing the relationship. Rather than the never-ending circle of revenge, the Forgiveness Cycle ends up being shaped like a curve, because the energy doesn't keep feeding the hurt.

That's something that's fascinating to me. In the Revenge Cycle, the energy just comes back and keeps feeding itself, whereas in the Forgiveness Cycle, the energy diffuses. This plays itself out not only psycho-spiritually, but physically, too. The Mayo Clinic reports that forgiveness results in decreased anxiety and stress, lower blood pressure, lower risk of depression, and even stronger immune and heart health.

The Scriptures

In our Gospel today, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness for 40 days. We read a version of this story every year on the first Sunday of Lent. Unlike the other two synoptic Gospels, Mark doesn't describe what temptations Jesus faces. We read this story every year as a springboard into talking about what tempts us, what draws us away from living our humanity most fully, so that we can repent, that is change our ways.

Friends, I'd like to suggest that one of the central temptations that plagues the human race is how we perpetuate the revenge/retaliation/payback cycle which dehumanizes one another and keeps the energy of pain going. Since the Forgiveness Cycle starts with telling our story and naming the hurt, my homework for you this week is to ask you to come up with five reasons why people forgive. Write them down, make a note in your phone, do whatever it takes to be able to keep the motives for forgiveness in front of you. Then, spend some time thinking and praying about a hurt or grudge that you carry. It could be fresh or ancient. Think about your emotions around it. Perhaps this will be all in your head. Perhaps it will be something you will journal. Perhaps you'll do this processing with a trusted friend or therapist. Spend some time thinking about a hurt or grudge that you carry, naming the emotions honestly. (I'd highly recommend taking a break of a day or two in between this step and the next.)

The next phase of your homework is to step back from your personal experience again and ask yourself “Why is forgiveness important?” Follow that up with what is empathy? What is compassion? Finally, look back to your personal story of grudge or pain, and hold up your reflections on the dynamics of forgiveness. Pray about whether it is time that you can lay this burden down, release the energy of this pain, recognize your shared humanity with the other, and move on.

Reminder: forgiveness does not necessarily equal reconciliation. There are some relationships it is not healthy for us to be in. The scriptures tell us that “to everything there is a season.” The relationship in question may have run its course. However, whether you reconcile or release, I assure you that when you free yourself from the Grudge/Revenge Cycle, you’ll be tapping into the Divine and that Easter joy will find its way to you.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I offer you Psalm 25 once again:

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your
steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD!
Good and upright is the LORD, who instructs sinners in the way.
The LORD leads the humble in what is right.
All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep God’s covenant and decrees.

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