

FORGIVE AND FORGET?

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STORY FOR ALL AGES

“What if Nobody Forgave? The Story of Grudgeville” from *What If Nobody Forgave?*, pg. 89.

SERMON

I called a friend the other day. We were talking and I told her that I was planning to do a sermon on forgiveness. She quickly responded “I don’t believe in that.” This of course led to more conversation. We both agreed that the general interpretation of forgiveness was sugary sweet, naive and belonged in overly simplistic greeting card messages. What my friend was saying is that forgiveness is a lot more involved than just saying “I forgive you.”

One of the problems is that forgiveness gets mixed in with a neat little phrase “forgive and forget”. I don’t know about you, but I grew up thinking that once you said “I’m sorry” that by simply uttering the words “I’m sorry”, the offense was immediately erased. If you could bring yourself to say “I’m sorry”, then like magic, you could go on like nothing ever happened. Of course, “I’m sorry” was understood to

mean much more than a simple apology: it meant forgiveness was included. And somehow if you were a really good person and apologized, forgiveness was understood and then you could forget anything bad ever happened. In actuality, forgiveness was simply glossed over or ignored and the silence or deflection of attention pushed the offense below the surface.

Rebecca Parker in her book “Proverbs to Ashes” does a very effective job of dismantling the ‘forgive and forget’ scenario. Parker comes from a long line of ministers and is a minister herself. After she relates her story of being sexually abused, Parker has to confront the theology of “turn the other cheek”. Can she do this? Our religious culture and indeed our society in general expects women (and others) to turn the other cheek, or forget, and go on as if nothing has happened. This lack of willingness to confront difficult situations, including rape and incest, has helped fill abused women’s shelters across the land – unfortunately, the demand keeps growing. To turn the other cheek is to allow history to repeat itself. And in the short-run, that might seem to be the easiest thing to do. But to forget does not break the cycle.

I think the answer to this lies in understanding what we mean by forgiveness and discovering what is the appropriate response after

forgiveness. The ‘forgive and forget’ mantra needs to be dismantled and retooled to allow healthy relationships and honest communication. You can’t just say “I’m sorry” and go on.

But forgiveness is a very complex concept. I have thought about the issue of forgiveness for some time. I started by asking myself what does forgiveness mean to me and have I ever extended or received forgiveness. I was surprised to realize that I couldn’t think of any major forgiveness scenarios in my life. It wasn’t until I got away from the idea that forgiveness was closely linked to an apology, an “I’m sorry” issued after some misdeed or breach of trust that I began to dig under the assumptions.

I thought about a recurring situation my brother and I faced in childhood. We were often subjected to “punishment” that was fueled by anger and an uncontrolled hot temper. In time, we grew older and big enough to counter the violence. We each used different methods to stop the physical attacks. But the emotional effects were long-lasting. And no one ever talked about it. Over the years, the events were gradually swept under the rug. Conversations about childhood assumed a rosy glow and contrary accounts were minimized and hushed. But it didn’t go away. It was always under the surface.

I read in this morning's news about how the survivors of the Virginia Tech massacre would carry their wounds. A physician remarked that how the human body would accept an injury, in this case shrapnel that can't be removed, and form a cocoon around it. After the cocoon was formed, there wouldn't be much pain. The body would block out or forget that the foreign object was there. But, the entry scars on the skin would always remain visible. As would the emotional scars.

In my situation, I found that, even as an adult, every time I talked with the person who was responsible for the violence in my childhood, I kept waiting for the pattern to continue - to be disappointed, hurt or blamed. Deep down, I wanted to be loved and accepted. I always had hope for some kind of unconditional love. So even though I expected it, it was always a surprise when I was indeed disappointed and hurt. The physical violence had ended but the emotional patterns had not changed.

One day I was talking with a mentor and she mentioned boundaries. I am good at setting boundaries for myself, but for some reason, it never occurred to me to set boundaries in relationships from childhood. I had what you might call a light bulb moment, an aha moment. I made a covenant with myself that I wasn't going to be victim in the relationship anymore. A few months later in the next

face-to-face conversation with this person, I said that I didn't desire to end the relationship but it must change. I said this is what I remember from the childhood events. I acknowledged that these events were a very real presence in my life. Then I laid out a series of ground rules for continued relationship. I said "when you say this, it makes me feel...", "when you throw in quick slights in otherwise agreeable statements, I hear..." and so on. I want to talk openly and with integrity, and to acknowledge underlying issues and motives. I value our relationship but I can only continue if it is healthy. The old pattern must be broken. We must learn a new relationship. It was one of the most difficult things I've done. But I refused to continue in a self-defeating relationship pattern.

In thinking about forgiveness, I realized that I had not forgiven the person for the actions of long ago, but I had begun to claim a healthy sense of self. I had also been willing to redefine who the other person was in the present. I will never forget the instances of long ago, but I am willing to engage in a more honest relationship that allows us to be human, warts and all.

Forgiveness is a process of reclaiming. It is a process that doesn't necessarily forget the hurts, pains and losses, but instead, allows for healing. None of us will leave this earth untouched by hurt, pain or

grief. We can be victims or we can reclaim ourselves and redefine our relationships. In other words, forgiveness is a process that involves reclaiming, redefining and healing. It is not simply a catchy phrase “I forgive you”. It is a process of healing that requires our engagement.

Often we aren't ready to enter into the process of forgiveness or healing. We lash out, hold grudges, blame others. It can keep us from moving on.

In a wonderful parable from the New Testament, Jesus meets a crippled man. In John 5:1-14 we read:

¹Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

⁷“Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

⁸Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the

man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.”

¹¹But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk’.”

¹²So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?”

¹³The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

¹⁴Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

“Pick up your mat and walk.” Take action. Have faith that in re-envisioning your current state, you are a participant in your future. The crippled man at first said “there is no one to take me into the water” and then he complains “others go down ahead of me”. Sometimes we say we want to change but when the opportunity comes to change our situation, the excuses pour forth. We want things to be better but do we really want them to be different?

Last summer when I was working as a chaplain intern at a large hospital, I was summoned to the cardiac floor. The nurses were at their wits end trying to work with a newly admitted patient. The not quite elderly patient was being belligerent, yelling and shouting at the

nurses. She listed a thousand and one ways that the hospital, doctors, nurses, family and everyone had made her life so difficult. With her temperament, I was not surprised to learn that she was scheduled for heart surgery the next morning.

I walked into the woman's room and introduced myself as chaplain. She immediately added the church to her offender list. This woman had so much anger. It was no wonder her heart was malfunctioning. I guessed that heart surgery was only a band-aid and would have little effect on her health.

After listening to her tirades, interjecting questions and rationality where possible, I finally blurted out "Do you want to be healed?"

The woman was stopped short. There was a long moment of stunned silence. I held eye contact. Then her answer spewed forth "Not yet!" It was no surprise that when I checked the next morning reports, that this woman had checked herself out of the hospital.

I don't recommend forgoing treatment, especially surgery that can improve your health. What I do recommend is being clear with yourself that 1) you want to be healed, and 2) you are willing to be different than before.

This process starts a long time before the healing. To forgive is to let go of what we view as normal in a relationship or even how the relationship was in the past or in the moment before. Forgiveness is a process of finding a new normal. Eventually we might find that relationships with self and others have been redefined and healing has begun.

One way of entering into the process of forgiveness is to hold out your hands. With one hand, put up a stop sign. This might be to say stop hurting me, stop talking to me like that or it might be aimed at inner selves to stop replaying un-affirming or destructive messages. The 'stop sign' is a setting of boundaries.

With your other hand, hold it out palm up. It is a hand of reconciliation. It is a welcoming of the other person (or self) back into relationship – not as before, but with a clearer understanding of respect.

This is hard to do. And we should not rely on the forgiveness process of others to excuse our responsibility in creating havoc or causing harm. We are all human and at times we need to accept the extended hands of others, and sometimes, we need extend our own hands.

A few months ago, I reflected on the Amish school shooting in the church newsletter. I was awed by the Amish community's willingness to include the shooter's family in their own circle of grief. They had lost five young schoolgirls in a horrific manner. Then the Amish had the courage to open their hearts wide enough to realize that the shooter's family was also a victim.

The grieving families took action. In the same week of burying their own children, the Amish attended the shooter's funeral. This had to be almost as difficult as facing the death of your own child. There would be time later to work through the grieving process but what the Amish did was to plant seeds of forgiveness. Nothing will bring their girls back to life. The deed cannot be undone. The families and Amish community were left to do without a part of their future. But the seeds of healing were sewn. They reached out a hand, palm up.

I ask you to think about what forgiveness means to you. Is it a quick and easy "I forgive you" or is it a more complex process. Are there relationships and situations in your life that warrant reclaiming or redefining? Is it possible to set boundaries that include love and compassion? Is it possible to let go of hurts and wounds? Is it possible to face our fears? Is it possible to risk healing? What would

it look like to change, to try a different approach, to see life anew?
Can we dare enter into a process of forgiveness? Can you lift a hand
to say “stop” and another to forgive?

In the words of Anaïs Nin: “And the day came when the risk to
remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to
blossom.”

Blessed be and amen.