

How Should I Forgive?

When I was in seminary, the minister at my field education church preached a sermon on forgiveness. And in it he said something that really struck me: “Jesus wants us to be like him.” Oh! Yes, of course. How very simple. How impossibly hard. And perhaps the hardest part of being like Jesus is this business of forgiveness.

We might wish that the early Christians had forgotten, or neglected to write down, all those difficult things Jesus said about forgiveness. But Jesus did say those difficult things about forgiveness, like the response we heard, in our reading from Matthew's gospel, when Peter asks, “*How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?*” That probably seemed like a whole lot of forgiveness to Peter, but Jesus tells him it's not enough. “*I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.*” In other words, don't put limits on your forgiveness. And then, to elaborate on his answer, Jesus tells one of his disturbing little stories.

A king is settling accounts with his servants. He begins with the one who owes him the most—ten thousand talents. Ten thousand talents would be about 1.5 billion dollars in today's world. Of course the servant can't pay up, and so the king orders him to be sold, along with his family and all his possessions, to help repay the debt. But the servant pleads with the king to have patience, promising that he will repay all he owes. The king, of course, knows that this is impossible, but he takes pity on him and forgives his debt.

Now you would think that the servant would go out filled with gratitude and good will. After all, he has just been let off the hook for a debt he could never hope to repay. But as it happens, the first person he encounters is another servant who owes *him* money. This man's debt is much smaller, a hundred denarii, about three thousand dollars, by today's standards. The first servant seizes the second and demands that he pay up. Remember, it's not as if he needs this money to repay the king. His debt has been forgiven. The second servant pleads for time, but the first servant has him thrown into jail until he can repay what he owes. When the king hears of this, he summons the first servant and hands him over to the jailers until he can repay his entire debt. Then comes the kicker to this story: “*So my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*”

Now I don't know about you, but I find the end of this passage pretty disturbing, and it's not because I'm afraid that I will be imprisoned for my lack of forgiveness. No, what distresses me is that Jesus seems to imply that *God* is unforgiving. It seems as if Jesus is asking humankind for a higher level of forgiveness—seventy times seven—than God, represented by the king in this story, who only gives his servant one chance. What are we to make of this?

The only way this saying makes sense to me is to hear it as descriptive rather than prescriptive. I know from my own experience, and from talking with many others, that holding onto our hurts, cherishing our grudges, continually picking at the scabs of our wounds, does in fact become a kind of imprisonment. I've always liked the Ann Landers line that "holding a grudge is like letting someone you don't like live rent-free in your head."

Christian Century magazine, a few years back, reported on a study on forgiveness that found that almost 75 percent of those surveyed believe they have been forgiven by God for past mistakes and wrong-doing, but only 52 percent say they have forgiven others. How similar we are to the first servant in our gospel story! It's fine for God to forgive (particularly when God is forgiving us), but somehow it seems much easier, much more human, much more natural, to want our "pound of flesh" when we have been hurt or offended. But it does seem that God's forgiveness and our forgiveness are related.

In seminary, I took a New Testament course with a professor who was an expert on Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. He contended that in the phrase of the Lord's Prayer—*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*—the word translated "as" is really closer to "so that." Forgive us our sins, or trespasses, *so that* we can forgive others. The grace of being forgiven, and the freedom it brings, makes it more possible for us to forgive others.

So what can we do when we have decided that we want to forgive someone who has hurt us, but we're finding it hard to do so? How do we get beyond all those hurt and angry feelings that always seem to get in the way of forgiving? Theologian and ethicist, Lewis Smedes (in *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*), outlines four stages in the process of forgiveness. Smedes names the first stage, "We Hurt." The first thing we need to do, when we have been hurt, is to acknowledge our pain. Our pain is a normal response to being unfairly wronged by another. As Marjorie Thompson writes, in her article "Moving Toward Forgiveness," *Forgiving does not mean denying our hurt. . . . Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the negative impact of a person's actions or attitudes on our lives. Until we are honest about our actual feelings, forgiveness has no meaning.* In other words, if we deny our hurt, or say that what happened doesn't matter, or that we're not really upset, what's to forgive?

Once we have acknowledged that "We Hurt," we move into the second stage, which Smedes names, "We Hate." When we squarely face the wrong that has been done to us, we feel anger toward those who have hurt us. "We Hate" may sound like strong language, but this stage has a very specific purpose. It helps us to believe in, and fight for, our right to be treated fairly—and not to be injured—by the people in our lives. Just as Jesus is clear about our need to forgive, he is equally clear about our need to name, and oppose, injustice. And the anger we feel, in this second stage, helps us to do this. Some writers about forgiveness caution us not to forgive too soon. If we try to forgive without experiencing our natural outrage at being hurt, we may end up excusing, and even enabling, behaviors that we should be challenging.

I'll never forget a video I saw, when I was in seminary, which explored the role of the church in helping, and sometimes harming, victims of domestic violence. One of the people interviewed was a woman who had been repeatedly beaten by her husband. With tears in her eyes, she said that she had turned to her priest for help, but her priest had told her that she should stay with her husband and forgive him each time he beat her. It wasn't until her husband almost killed her that she gathered the strength to leave. It would have been much better if her priest had helped her to name her husband's behavior as wrong, and to get angry enough, in her own defense, to seek help in getting out safely before she suffered any more injury.

This second stage—this stage of anger strong enough to feel like hatred—is a natural part of the journey toward forgiveness. But we also need to remember that it's not the destination. I think that when we talk about how hard it is to forgive, most of us are stuck in this second stage. We worry that if we let go of our anger, the person who hurt us is going to “get away with it,” and this just doesn't seem fair. Perhaps we want vindication that we are innocent and they are in the wrong. Or maybe the person has recognized their wrongdoing, and even asked us to forgive them, but we're not quite ready to give up the power we get from withholding our pardon. Or maybe we're just so used to our resentment that we're not quite sure what we'd do without it.

But remember that our anger also imprisons *us*. In the book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes, *I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness—that I am one of the other kind. But even though it was funny, and actually true, it started to be too painful to stay this way. They say we are not punished for the sin but by the sin, and I began to feel punished by my unwillingness to forgive.*

Whether we decide that we want to move beyond the “We Hate” stage because we want to be like Jesus, releasing others through our forgiveness, or because we want to release ourselves from the negative effects of our anger, in the third stage, according to Smedes, “We Heal Ourselves.” Our own healing is an important part of our ability to forgive—our healing gives us the strength, not only to confront our hurts, but to recognize our own weaknesses and our likeness to others, including those who have wronged us. It's only when we realize that we all make mistakes, we all do hurtful things, we all stand in need of forgiveness, that we begin to have the compassion to forgive others.

There is a wonderful collection of stories about the Desert Abbas and Ammas, Christian men and women who retired to monasteries in the Egyptian desert, during the third and fourth centuries, C.E. One of these stories concerns a brother who had committed a fault. *A council was called to which Abba Moses [one of the elders of the community] was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, "Come, for everyone is waiting for you." So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, "What is this, Father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another." When they heard that they said no more to the brother but forgave him. (The Sayings of the Desert Fathers)* As we become more aware of our own shadows, our own hurtful behaviors,

our compassion grows and, with it, our ability to forgive.

The fourth of Smedes' four stages of forgiveness is entitled, "We Come Together"— we reconcile with those we have forgiven. Ideally, forgiving another restores healthy relationship between us. But what if the other doesn't admit that they have hurt us, and may even hurt us again? How can we "Come Together" with them? What does Smedes mean when he speaks of coming together? When we let go of our hurt and anger, and reach out to the other, there is something required in return if we are going to reestablish friendship. To be specific, Smedes tells us, *you must expect those who hurt you to be honestly in touch with the reality of your falling-out, your pain, and their responsibility for them.* He likens reconciliation to beginning a second journey together. *If the other cannot or will not pay the fare, you will have to settle for your own healing, your private freedom from hate, your own inner peace.*

Sometimes we may forgive another and still choose, for our own wellbeing, not to be in relationship with them. I have also come to distinguish between reconciliation and what I call "rapprochement." I believe that repentance— the other's admission of responsibility for injuring us and expression of regret for that injury— is necessary for reconciliation. But, if the other is truly unable to recognize that they have hurt us, and yet we still want, or need, to have some kind of relationship, as with a family member, we may choose a kind of rapprochement— a letting go of anger and blame— that allows us to be in relationship without the expectation of true reconciliation. *Settling for your own healing, your private freedom from hate, your own inner peace,* is also the only option if the person who hurt you is no longer alive.

Through my own experience with forgiveness, I've come to believe that there is nothing more powerful for healing even the deepest injuries. Forgiving others releases us from being tied up in our anger and pain. Forgiving ourselves heals our guilt and shame and renews our hope. In ongoing relationships, like marriage, the practice of forgiveness— both offering it, and asking for it when we have been hurtful— opens the door to an ever deepening level of trust. And what might happen if we could learn to practice forgiveness at the national and international levels? Through its "truth and reconciliation" process, the post-apartheid government of South Africa committed itself to the idea that forgiveness may be the only way to stop the cycle of violence and revenge which fuels so many of the conflicts in our world.

Jesus knew the power of forgiveness when he placed it in the forefront of his teaching. The fact that, 2000 years later, we still find forgiveness so hard doesn't mean there is anything wrong with his teaching. It just means that we're still learning. So I hope that you are able to deeply experience God's forgiveness— that forgiveness which makes our forgiveness possible. And I hope that you will be encouraged to forgive whatever it is you need to forgive, in others and in yourself. If you ask for help, God can begin the work of forgiveness in you, and you may be truly amazed at the difference it makes. No matter how hard it may seem, Jesus wants us to be like him, forgiving as he forgave, without limit and from our hearts.

Amen.