

Forgiveness:

Forgiveness is much misunderstood and yet strangely fascinating for the larger culture. Do you remember the awe that the media and the world felt when the Amish school girls were murdered by the psychopath in Pennsylvania? The Amish community reached out to the murderer's children and even gave them money and support. The media were stunned by what they saw. They were marveling over forgiveness, a forgiveness that was ingrained in that community and which offered them the most sensible means for dealing with this most grievous problem. The reason the Amish were able to do this amazing thing is because it was not the first time they had forgiven.

When applied to God, forgiveness is a metaphor. All language is a metaphor when applied to God because God simply does not fit in our language, hence we need metaphor. To say that God forgives is true, but it is also inadequate to describe what God does. The problem is that we have no adequate words to describe what God does. So we use lots of them. God saves, redeems, forgives, adopts, marries, shepherds, atones, etc. Most of these words actually come from another part of our life and we lift them out of that context and apply them to God because this helps us speak his love.

This essay considers the metaphor of forgiveness. It comes from the banking world. It is what banks almost never do to lenders. I saw them do it once, for Salt Lake Lutheran High School. We were in way over our heads in debt and the bank did not want to foreclose on a small Christian high school. The bank forgave part of our debt, several hundred thousand dollars of debt. It was a significant forgiveness.

This essay, however, does not focus so much on what God does as what we do now that we are forgiven. Jesus has enjoined us to forgive as well. (Matt. 18 is but one spot and we too often only go there. Consider also Lk 15, Jn 20, Gal. 6:1, II Cor 1-7, but especially Chs. 2 and 5.) As the forgiven people of God we are also given to be forgiving people of God. But as I have ministered and spoken with folks I find that they rarely can articulate what forgiveness is or have any clue about how to go about doing it. This essay is an attempt to rectify that.

When someone wrongs me, I have a number of non-forgiving options before me. My responses generally fall under a handful of broad categories.

1. **Revenge** I can get even. My first grade teacher was against this and so I have learned not to do this, but there are times when it still presents itself as an option. I knew a woman who would not speak to her husband for weeks on end if he had done something she did not like. She was giving him the silent treatment as sort of a punishment. (they were married for over 50 years before he died)
2. **Rise above it** I can be tough – this involves saying that I am bigger than this and not going to get even. It more or less involves eating it, saying that it doesn't hurt that bad.

3. **Sit on it** I can bear a grudge – I mean by this that while I will not actively try to get even, but if the opportunity were to present itself, I would certainly not lift a finger to help you. Quite often, this option is chosen when the consequences of #1 are too fearsome. I won't punch you because I know I will get in trouble. But if I find a way to make you hurt without those consequences, I will take that opportunity.
4. **Delay action** I can gunny-sack it – this means that I am simply going to defer my option until later. The problem here is that once out of sight, it often goes out of mind, but it doesn't really disappear. I still carry this burden around with me and finally my gunny-sack may burst if I have stuffed too much in there. This usually happens at family reunions or holiday gatherings when someone suddenly starts weeping or yelling about things long past. They are really just emptying their gunny sack. Even if we don't dump this out on the table next thanksgiving, carrying this load around with us really wears upon us. That said, we need to be able to defer, after all, the local grocery store may not be the best place to have the argument, but it is not a long term solution.
5. **Put myself in their shoes** I can understand it. This is actually the most popular option and for the world understanding the sin and sinner feels as if it is the most adult sort of option. If you yell at me and call me a name, I can understand that you were tired, your day was bad, you're sick, etc. The media are great at this. When the deranged man slew the Amish little girls, the media types immediately set about poring over his past, looking for some abuse, some trauma, something that would explain why he had done such a thing. They are looking for understanding. We do this on an interpersonal level all the time. If I say "I'm sorry I called you a 'Ninny,' but I was having a really bad day" I have not just then asked for your forgiveness, I have actually asked you to understand what I did and to say that you would have done the same thing if you were in my shoes. Conversely, we usually respond with "It's OK," or "Don't worry about it," or something similar. When we say such things, we have not actually forgiven that act, we have understood it. Many count this as forgiveness. It is not. Understanding has two problems
 - a. It doesn't build relationship – it simply makes us cynical about ourselves and others.
 - b. It has a real limit. Don't hurt my child, my spouse, or something I really care about and ask me to understand it. If a close personal friend does something hurtful that also can exceed my understanding, but so can the repeated small sin. Why don't I do some things that make it easier for my wife to do laundry? After 20 years of this, the understanding might just fail her.

6. **Denial/Tolerance** – I can say that this is not a problem at all or simply exercise the virtue of tolerance. I can admit that there are issues in this world, I have them too, and I can be magnanimous with this. It is a little like being tough, but this is a little different.

Please do not get me wrong, I think the world would be much better if we all practiced a little more understanding or tolerance with each other. But there are times when understanding fails us. The Amish folks in Pennsylvania got this point. What good would it do to understand why the man shot their children? Would that make the pain any less? Would that make them any less dead? Would it heal their hearts? No, that would take something else. I still remember the Amish response to this tragedy. It was a great witness to God's love for people. The Amish set up a college fund for perpetrator's children after people started sending them money. This was especially beautiful because Amish don't send their own children to college, they don't really believe in sending children to college. But they knew that the children of this man would need every advantage they could get. The Christian says that the something else is actually forgiveness. The Amish did not understand the sin, they forgave it. So, let's turn to that:

What I do not want to say is that our motive for forgiving someone is therapeutic. It may indeed have a real benefit for me and for the one I forgive, but the motive for this is always Christ. I have been changed by the Gospel, called, gathered, enlightened into a different way of being. It is a better way of being, I believe that, but I am this because Christ makes me this way in his Spirit.

When we forgive we actually do a number of things. We need to remember that we are not Jesus here. We may want to forgive and forget, we may want to separate as far as the east is from the west. But that is what God says he will do, not what he enjoins on us. There is that old man who will try to trip us up in this, who will seek to lay these old hurts before us again and try to evoke from us anger or some negative response.

1. We are saying no to options 1-6 above and in so doing admit our own helplessness before sin. I don't need to understand it, I won't try to get even, I won't bear a grudge, I am not tough, and I am not going to carry this around for a while. This is hard.
2. We are saying that what the other person did to us hurt, it was wrong. That wrong gives me a right, a right to get even, etc. Forgiveness is not weak, nor is it a milquetoast response. Until the other is ready to admit that the deed was actually wrong, then our forgiveness cannot really be received. This is pretty important. Both parties need to agree that this was a wrong for the forgiveness to be expressed. The preacher may also want to speak of what I like to call "personal forgiveness." Sometimes the offending party will not or cannot repent. What if they are dead? We can still say #3 below and that can be really, really important for us. A couple of observations seem important at this point:

- a. Forgiveness is really a one way thing – we forgive – not because the other person has met some condition. Too often we want to measure the depth of their penitence. I cannot really see that and it is a foolish errand.
 - b. This will require faith on the part of the forgiver and the forgiven – it is hard to be forgiven and to forgive. God has forgiven us, and that is hard to believe, it takes God’s Spirit working in our hearts. Likewise we will need the Spirit to empower this whole conversation. The miracle is that he does, and he continues to do this.
3. This is the most important part: When we forgive we are saying that this sin, this wrong, this hurt, was dealt with on a cross by Jesus death there nearly two millennia ago. When confronted by the hurt, we say Jesus died for that. Jesus said these words were potent (Mt. 18, Jn 20, etc.). They echoed in heaven itself or are they simply an echo of a heavenly reality? Both interpretations are possible for what Jesus said.
 4. The last element of forgiveness is a promise. We promise to always see that sinful deed red with his blood. Please know that God never enjoins us to forgive and forget. That phrase is actually native to Shakespeare, not the Bible. The Bible does tell us that God forgets our sins (Ps 25:7, Ps 103:12, etc.), but he never asks us to do this. We promise when we forgive that we will not base our future actions on this deed and if I do, then I am the one with the problem. Thus, in the illustration used above, if I drag up the fact that you called me a “Ninny” at some later date, I have erred. I promised not to use this against you anymore. I forgave it.

The person intent on forgiveness will be cruel about the Law. Not because he or she is cruel, but because the Law must do its work before the forgiveness can be expressed. The greatest detriment to this sort of forgiveness is to slip into options 2 or 5. I either tell them it didn’t hurt or that I understand why they did it. No, sin is banal, it makes no sense, don’t expect it to make sense. And sin does hurt.

This situations are often filled with grief and pain and they make us feel terrible. When the person who has hurt us comes to us, it is a dirty part of the relationship and we want it behind us. But understanding doesn’t really build the relationship, it glosses over the problem. Forgiveness really makes it stronger.

All this is really important because today Jesus forgives and in that forgiveness empowers our own forgiveness as the Body of Christ. We cannot preach this too much. We are swimming upstream on this in our culture. Our culture firmly believes that to forgive something is to forget it. Oprah has raised understanding and victimhood to a sacred status. “I did what did because my parents abused me.” Personal responsibility for our actions has been eroded. Is this because we have not forgiven and without forgiveness such responsibility is just too terrible to imagine?

Even within the Church we hear people, including Synodical members, apologizing not for the deed but for causing offence, for giving the perception of something that offended you. But is

that really a genuine apology? Have we as a church body forgotten how to forgive and what forgiveness for our “walk together”? (That is what “synod” really means – the together road.)

How much of this is due to the litigious society in which we live? Our attorney tells us never to admit culpability lest we get sued. Perhaps the preacher wants to explore a new movement in the medical profession in which hospitals and doctors admit mistakes immediately and up front as a way to forestall getting sued. It seems to work. When we deny, we simply trigger a stubborn response in some folks who will demand that we admit it to them.