

“Forgive? Forget?”

Last week I defined forgiveness this way: *“Forgiveness is having the absolute right to revenge for a wrong done to you, and giving up that right to God.”* I recognize that this is not the only definition there is, and it may well be one with which you have some difficulty (I know others have; they’ve told me so). I don’t maintain this is the best definition; but in the context of how we all too often employ forgiveness, to me it makes some sense.

When we use forgiveness to excuse away behavior, or pretend it did not happen, we demean the person who was hurt or wounded, and we diminish the power of forgiveness. Forgiveness, for a lot of people, is the ecclesiastical equivalent of getting a kiss on the cheek by your least-favorite aunt. It’s not all that bad; but it ain’t all that good, either. Forgiveness should be a glorious thing . . . a benefit we would crawl over hot coals to obtain . . . a source of joy unending.

When the disciples heard Jesus talk about how we are to seek reconciliation, they (as do many of us) had questions. Typically it’s Peter who raises it: *“ . . . how often should I forgive?”* His question reveals two things: 1) Peter is not quite ready to forgive (“should” is a kind of “iffy” word in this context). 2) Like many of us most of the time, Peter seems ready to think that forgiveness should come TO us, not THROUGH us.

To his credit, Peter does seem ready to move ahead: *“As many as seven times?”* I have looked and looked to discover why Peter asks that particular question with that specific number. The best I can come up with is that, somewhere in the rabbinic literature is the opinion that, for the same offense, forgiveness offered three times is the most that could be expected. Apparently, Peter is inclined to be even more expansive; but he is not ready for the bombshell Jesus tosses his way.

Why is forgiving so hard? Why do we keep coming back to the same questions raised here: Do I need to forgive? Why do I need to forgive?

How forgiving do I need to be? Can I withhold forgiveness? When? To be sure, one reason we find forgiveness to be difficult is that our sins get in the way — sins of jealousy, anger, revenge, and especially hatred.

But hold on! Aren't all these emotions? Didn't God give us these emotions? How can they be sin? For instance: How do you keep from getting angry? (Count to ten? Mark Twain wrote: "*When angry, count to four. When very angry, swear.*") Many of us seem to find that sage advice.) In Ephesians St. Paul counsels: "***Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.***"

So . . . Yes, emotions are part of our created nature — from God . . . but like everything else in the creation, it has been corrupted by sin. So we get angry, but we don't let it end there; we lash back in anger, we hurt (often disproportionately to the injury done to us). Once we are in the grip of emotions, the will becomes compromised. We "lose control," "lose our heads," "go ballistic," "wig out." (isn't it amazing how many phrases we have for the negative things we get into? That must mean this is important!)

One of the reactions our emotions often lead us to pursue is to "get even." I was surfing the radio dial one Thursday morning and happened to stumble on a message from Dr. Charles Stanley. I came in the middle, so I don't know all of what he had to say on the topic of forgiveness, but much of what I did hear him say seemed on target to me.

He was addressing the issue of unforgiveness, and told his audience that when we refuse to forgive, it becomes like a hardened rock at the pit of our stomachs. We find ourselves in pain, ongoing pain, unresolved pain, and we don't know its source. The source is this hard rock of unforgiveness pressing in on us. What is required, he suggested (and I like this phrase), is "the surgery of repentance," repenting our lack of forgiveness. Like all surgeries, this can be painful: to go to the person who has wronged you and confess that you have sinned by not forgiving? (Heh! "Piece a cake!")

But then Dr. Stanley said some things with which I had to disagree: chiefly that the primary beneficiary of any act of forgiving we do will be us. Somehow in American religious thinking there always seems to be a track that leads us back to self-interest. Jesus Himself did this, and calls us to do likewise: make “the other” the primary focus.

I need to have the surgery of forgiveness so that I can be the better tool by which Christ and the Spirit can touch the life of that person from whom I have withheld forgiveness. It’s not about me and what I hope to gain. It may be true that, as an auxiliary blessing, I will get rid of that hard stone in my person when I let go of the resentment, anger, and all the rest. But if it is THE reason I am making these steps, I might as well stop right there.

Forgiveness is an act of willingness. In his book, Will and Spirit, psychologist Gerald May makes the distinction between willfulness and willingness. Willfulness is the stubborn, me-centered, oppositional stance we often take. It is the 2-year-old in us, wanting control, wanting attention, wanting power. Willingness is the giving of the self to another. Gerald May writes: “. . . *willingness is saying yes to the mystery of being alive in each moment. Willfulness is saying no, or perhaps more commonly, ‘Yes, but . . .’*”

In the book, Letters and Papers from Prison, a letter from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to a young couple about to be married included this wise counsel: “*Live together in forgiveness, for without it no human fellowship, least of all a marriage, can survive.*” What that young couple had going in their favor is a kind of built-in willingness, at least at the start, to forgive because of the value placed on the relationship. That valuing is part of willingness — it is meshing one will to another. That could mean trouble in a relationship. Ruth Graham, wife of Evangelist Billy, is quoted: “*In a marriage, if both think exactly the same, one of them is redundant.*” So we’re not talking about a Vulcan mind-meld here.

What we are talking about the turning toward another because you want to be connected in a positive and healthy way with that person. That is

willingness; and forgiveness rarely happens, or happens only half-heartedly, without it. When emotions are reigning (especially negative ones), willingness suffocates and willfulness reigns.

Of all those negative emotions that get in the way of forgiveness, one rises above all others: pride! Anyone who speaks these words does not know the truth: *“I cannot forgive.”* Pride convinces us that these words are always the truth, and leads us to affirm: *“I will not forgive.”* Because forgiveness is an act of setting aside pride and moving toward the other person. That movement may be tentative, halting, stumbling, feckless, and it may feel stupid. There may be grounds for caution, self-protection, fear, and anger at the other person. Let’s be honest: our hurts hurt — as Lucy in Peanuts says, *“I don’t like pain; pain hurts!”*

So moving toward someone who has caused you injury, made you feel “less than,” deprived you of something you needed from them (love, affection, protection, etc.), or given you something you most definitely did not need from them (abuse!) is scary. It seems dangerous because it can be dangerous. It is nonetheless what we are called to do.

Those anxieties, concerns, fears, and questions are not part of the equation about forgiveness that Jesus sets before us. It’s not that Jesus doesn’t care if you’re feeling these emotions; they are not trivial or inconsequential. But neither can they be determinative, which is all too often what we make them.

Imbedded in Peter’s questions about forgiveness is a unspoken hope that there is a very minimal kind of behavior to be expected. If the rabbi said “three” and he was ready to go the seven, we think that’s a rather generous offer. It is not; it is minimalist thinking: *“What’s the least I can get away with?”* ***“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”*** [that’s how it comes out in the NRSV translation; the Greek is a tad fuzzy, (literally “seventy sevens”), many (myself included) think it should be translated “seventy times seven” which would be . . . 490)]. Many will take that to mean *“Hey! You get 490 chances at forgiveness. Once those are used up, you’re out of luck, Charlie.”*

I don't know about you, but if this is on a quota system, I could use up that quota in a single day! This whole exchange is grounded in Jewish numerology, in which seven is the "perfect" number, ten the "complete" number, so perfect times perfect times complete means: unendingly infinite.

In the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus sets forth a person who does not understand forgiveness at all. And for those of us who struggle to forgive, this is true of us as well. It's not just that this servant hadn't responded in kind to his master's generosity; he just flat out didn't get it. Oh, he got the part where his money woes ended; what he failed to see was that his situation was a death and resurrection. He was dead in his debt, dead to his previous way of life, and dead to any possibility of hope. In one gesture, he is released and the debt cancelled — resurrection.

Now comes the part we think we can ignore because it is so bizarre: Robert Capon: *"How could anyone outside of a comic book, we ask ourselves, 'actually fail to see that if you've just been forgiven a multimillion-dollar debt—and freed from slavery to boot—you don't first-off go and try to beat a hundred bucks out of somebody who's still a slave?' The unforgiving servant, however, is anything but a cartoon villain; he is, in fact, exactly what everybody else in the world is, namely, an average citizen totally unwilling to face death in any way. Not only hasn't he paid attention to his lord's death to a lifetime of bookkeeping; he's also unwilling to accept the death the king has handed him in setting him free. Note that last point well: in spite of the fact that he was an important enough servant to run up a whopping debt (mere stableboys don't have opportunities like that), his first thought on being released was not how to die to his old life and market himself in a new one. Rather, it was to go on with all his bookkeeping as before. Hence, with deathless logic, he puts the arm on his fellow servant. And hence he misses the whole new life he might have lived out of death. And so do we, when we refuse death."* (Parables of Grace, 48)

How can we who have been given new life, not live that new life? It is

because we mistake it for something less than what it is. Somehow we have become convinced that we have forgiveness as something due to us (whenever I hear politicians proclaim, “*God Bless America!*” I have to ask myself “*Is that a demand? An expression that God likes us best?*” or is it, as George Carlin once suggested, just some kind of verbal tick that they can’t seem to get rid of?). We get forgiveness automatically, apparently; but anybody else had better get it the old fashioned way; they have to earn it (?). And because we cannot quite fathom what God has given us, we are disinclined to give it away (‘cause we’re not sure that we will have it anymore if we do!)

Jesus says at the end of the parable: “***This king did what my heavenly Father will do to you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.***” What the King did was to toss the rotter in prison (I have to admit, I never understood “debtor’s prison”). God will toss us into prison? Eternally? No! In Jesus Christ God has already done everything necessary for us to be with Him eternally. He has declared an end to all the bookkeeping that he supposedly has been doing (“*making a list, checking it twice ...*”), piled everything onto Christ, nailed it to a cross and said, “*There! Try to make me take that back!*”)

But there remains the prison of self-centeredness. Some would call that “easy time” — I get to be with me? What better company could there be? Here’s the problem: when we are focused on self, we cannot be focused on God . . . and when we lose focus on God, we are lost.

Which brings me to this week and our national sense of observance. One part of me says that we should shove September 11, 2001 back into the time capsule of history and leave it alone: Why pick at old scabs? But another part of me recognizes what a profound impact that day had on our American consciousness, self-awareness, and psyche. With wars still being waged in some ways as response to the events of that day, the question arise out of today’s Gospel and other readings that bring to the fore this issue: Can we forgive September 11, 2001?

The Jewish community has melded as one around the issue of the

Holocaust: *“Never forget!”* Is that our rallying cry for 9/11? The fear, of course, is that, if you forget, you set yourself up to let it (or something worse) happen again — constant vigilance is required.

Let me deal with that concept of forget first. You cannot forget. I know, when you spend half the morning looking for your car keys because you can't remember where you put them last night, you want to say, *“Don't tell me I can't forget.”* You cannot forget. You may not be able to recall on cue or demand, but everything you have thought, smelled, seen, heard, experienced, and processed in the those little grey cells up there somewhere. So the notion, “Forgive and forget” cannot be accomplished. We are too well wired. Biblically, that is not what “forget” means; “forget” means “let go of.”

So, if forgive means to release from death to life, and forget means to let go of: when we are forgiven, we rise to newness of life, and when we forgive another, we let go of all that had hurt us. We will not forget—individually nor collectively—the events of September 11, 2001. I'll hazard a guess that everyone here can recall precisely where they were and what they were doing when the ghastly events of that morning began to be made known. In recalling, there will be pain (as is true for any loss we experience in life).

But we are invited by Christ to let go of the anger, the desire to retaliate, the hatred that can be engendered, and to give it to Him. He has taken it with Him already to the cross, and it was nailed there with Him and it died with Him. You have died with Him: dead to everything that gets in the way of the new life He wants and died for you to have.

I leave you with the reminder from Robert Capon:

“In heaven, there are only forgiven sinners. There are no good guys, no upright, successful types who, by dint of their own integrity, have been accepted into the great country club in the sky. There are only failures, only those who have accepted their deaths in their sins and who have been raised up by the King who himself died that they might live.”

But in hell, too, there are only forgiven sinners. Jesus on the cross did not sort out certain exceptionally recalcitrant parties and cut them off from the pardon of his death. He forgives the badness of even the worst of us, willy-nilly; and he never takes back that forgiveness, not even at the bottom of the bottomless pit.

The sole difference, therefore, between heaven and hell is that in heaven the forgiveness is accepted and passed along, while in hell it is rejected and blocked. In heaven, the death of the king is welcomed and becomes the doorway to new life in the resurrection. In hell, the old life of the bookkeeping world is insisted on and becomes, forever, the pointless torture it always was.

There is only one unpardonable sin, and that is to withhold pardon from others. The only thing that can keep us out of the joy of the resurrection is to join the unforgiving servant in his refusal to die.”

Amen.