

Forgiveness is a Process

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Father forgive them; for they know not what they do Luke 23:34

There is no doubt that Christ asks us to love each other. Sometimes this means we have to forgive each other first. It would be nice if this could happen quickly and simply, but this is not usually the case. Sometimes forgiveness is a slow process.

It would also be nice if forgiveness would just happen on its own. We can just give it some time. But usually some intervention must take place. In other words, we must work on it, sort of like tending a garden.

The process begins with a desire to forgive. Many factors may motivate this desire—none of them natural. Our natural inclination is to stay angry and hold a grudge. But, eventually, either misery gets the best of us and/or a deeply held belief system shakes loose the anger and gives way to a desire to forgive. For Christians this is a reverence for the commandment to love others—including our enemies.

After the willingness comes, we then need some fancy footwork. One might begin by getting inside the head of the person or persons with whom we are angry. Was the transgression intentional or an accident? Was the transgressor suffering in some way for which we can be sympathetic? If the person with whom we are angry tells his side of the story what would he say?

It is important, at this point, to begin a discussion of the matter. The trick here is to listen to the people we discuss this with. We may not really want to hear an objective opinion, but it is important that we do. And even if our friends and/or pastor agrees with us that we are the injured party, it feels good to loosen that knot of anger chocking us to death by talking it out with someone we trust.

It can also be very helpful to write about all this emotional chaos. Writing can lead to some interesting “Freudian Slips” about the true nature of what happened and how we feel about it.

For the sake of argument, however, what if we are truly a victim and the person we are angry with has no leg to stand on? How then do we forgive? Well in this case we must simply try to look at the bright side. For instance, our perpetrator has to bear the weight of his sin against us and we do not. (It might help, at this point, to mention that you do not have to like someone to forgive them or even associate with them. The dictionary definition of forgiveness is simply to let go of our anger. No hugs and kisses are required.)

Sometimes our best intentions get us no where. Forgiveness then becomes an act of grace. Corrie Ten Boom talks about this in her book, *The Hiding Place*. Corrie was a Christian who hid Jews

in her home during World War II. Eventually she and her sister were thrown into a concentration camp where her sister died. After the war Corrie was angry even though she preached forgiveness to other Holocaust survivors. One day Corrie was approached by a guard from the prison camp who asked her forgiveness. Corrie eloquently describes how she prayed for the forgiveness of God to channel through her so that she could shake the outstretched hand before her. Sometimes this is what it takes. Forgiveness as God's grace pouring through our willing heart.

The hardest part of forgiveness comes when we have to feel the "real" feelings behind what happened. Our anger is just a coverup for the pain brought on by the slight. The pain of rejection, the wound to our ego, the utter disappointment in this person, the fear that this will happen again.

The hardest part of forgiveness for me is to let go of the anger when the person who wounded me is in total denial about the whole thing. Recently my mother died. My sister was angry at me for hovering over my mother on her deathbed. She said that my mother would not want me there because she did not like me. I was so wounded by this that I vowed never to speak to my sister again until she apologized.

But a year later I felt the pain of estrangement more than the pain of what she had said. So I was stuck between my anger and my loneliness for my sister. I also felt the tugging of Christ's words to love each other—and doesn't that sometimes mean unconditionally?

So, eventually, I went through the process I describe above and came to the conclusion that forgiveness was important to my mental health and my salvation as a Christian. So I swallowed my pride. I sent of a stiff email telling her that I was ready to move on without an apology. Immediately I felt as if a great burden had been lifted. I also felt like a better servant of the Lord and this is no small matter to me.

I have yet to hear from my sister but I feel better because I have surrendered the toxic feelings I was holding on to for dear life. And I think this is exactly why Christ asks us to forgive each other. Not only is world peace at stake, it is important for our personal well being. I see everything Christ asks us to do as serving this dual purpose—personal fulfillment and our contribution to a better world.