



## Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time February 23, 2014 A

### FORGIVING LIFE'S HURTS

#### One of the most challenging and most important spiritual exercises in life's journey

In today's first reading from the book of Leviticus, God says to us:

*You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart.... Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.*

In today's Gospel, Jesus says to us:

*Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. ...For our heavenly Father makes the sun rise on the bad and the good.*

Forgiving hurt is not always hard especially when we believe people are sorry and do apologize for the wrong they have done. But some hurts, especially by family members or friends, can be very difficult to deal with. Forgiving might seem impossible. Yet it is clear from the Scriptures that Jesus expects his disciples to be good at forgiving. If we are to become "other Christs"—which is our Christian call—then we must grow in our ability to forgive others just as Jesus forgives us our faults and failings. Forgiveness is part of the job description of a good disciple.

#### How can we grow in the art of forgiveness?

I have been writing about forgiveness for over thirty years. My beliefs on this important and difficult issue are continuously evolving as I reflect, pray, listen to people's experiences in person and from books. The following are some general statements and thoughts on forgiveness.

- One of the first things we must get straight is that forgiveness is an *expectation* for disciples of Jesus. We may be lousy at forgiveness. We may have a strong resistance to forgiving a hurt that we are currently dealing with. We may even think that a particular hurt

is impossible to forgive. Despite this, we know that Jesus *expects* us to forgive *all hurts*, no matter how big they are. We may or may not believe this.

If we believe that a faithful disciple should work at forgiving all hurts, we are in a good spot spiritually. If we believe that *some* hurts should *not* be forgiven, we are in a bad spot spiritually; we are suffering from a form of spiritual blindness that hurts our relationship with Jesus.

- We need to be aware that unforgiveness hurts us spiritually, emotionally and even physically.

**Spiritually.** If we are in a situation where we have *no* desire to forgive a particular hurt, *no desire to even pray to help us* to forgive a particular hurt, we are intentionally hurting our relationship with Jesus. We have become *hard-hearted*—one of the biggest sins that Jesus condemned the Pharisees for.

**Emotionally.** When we carry hurts, grudges and resentments in our hearts that we have *no* desire to let go of, we are messing with our emotions. In his book *10 Secrets for Success and Inner Peace*, Wayne Dyer writes: "*Resentment is like venom that continues to pour through your system, doing it poisonous damage long after being bitten by a snake. It's not the bite that kills you; it's the venom.*" Deliberately holding onto resentments and grudges robs us of true inner peace and joy.

**Physically.** In his book, *The Healing Power of Forgiveness*, Jean Maalouf writes:

*The benefits of forgiveness have been presented by numerous studies on forgiveness. These studies were conducted in the fields of psychology, medicine, social science, and religion, and they concur in establishing the importance of positive emotions: gratitude, faith, love, forgiveness, hope, caring, and so on. According to these studies, such emotions and virtues have a definite impact on our cardiovascular functioning in particular, and our well-being in general....*

*Indeed, people who practice forgiveness report fewer health problems, feel better psychologically and*

emotionally, have less stress, and increase the efficient response of their immune system.

On the other hand, it has also been proven that bitterness, resentment, and anger can be a fertile soil for malignant growths. I read a story about a woman with breast cancer who visited a spiritual counselor. This woman was suffering for some time because she had undergone several operations while the cancer was spreading throughout her system. The counselor advised her to spend some time alone every day, to meditate, and to forgive everybody and everything. So she did. Among many different lines she read and meditated on, one particularly drew her attention, when St. Paul recommended to “put on the breastplate of faith and love” (1 Thess 5:8). This line inspired her prayer: *Christ is healing me. I put on the breastplate of faith and love and forgiveness and righteousness. I cast all my burdens of injury, hurt, resentment, and bitterness on Christ who is my savior and who sets me free. I am free of every illness. I am healthy. Thank you, God.*

For several days, she prayed this way with a heart full of love, hope, and determination. Subsequently, to the astonishment of her doctor, the lump in her breast disappeared and she was completely healed.

*This story is one of many similar stories that can be found in the medical records to prove that forgiveness and love have the power to dissolve gallstones, cancers, tumors, and other similar diseases. What the medical records tell us is that, when we are in a state of unforgiveness, our bodies start to manufacture extra chemicals—like adrenaline, adrenocorticotrophic hormone, and cortisone—that build up in the bloodstream. If a situation like this continues for a while unchecked, gastric ulcers and other serious illnesses can result.... Bitter thoughts make bitter cells. Better thoughts make better cells. Forgiving and loving thoughts create healing cells (pp 35-37).*

Despite the pain and terror her two daughters suffered in the July 7, 2005 London bombings, Patty Benton spoke with optimism and forgiveness shortly after her daughters emerged from surgery to address the injuries sustained in the blast.

“One thing the Bible tells us is that we need to pray for our enemies,” Benton said at a Duke Medical Center news conference. “Being angry and hateful doesn’t hurt the bombers. It hurts us. I guess I just feel a great sense of sadness. They’ve not accomplished anything. They’ve lost their lives, they’ve ruined their families’ lives, and ruined a lot of other people’s lives.”

Patty Benton said her family refused to hate the terrorist who changed their daughter’s lives. “It’s not an enemy that I have chosen, it’s an enemy that has chosen me, or my children,” she said.

What the Benton’s have chosen, however, is forgiveness, and in the process they have helped open our minds to understand the power of forgiveness.

**Corrie ten Boom** was a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp. After the war, she toured Europe giving talks, urging rival nations to forgive one another.

One night, after a talk in Munich, a man came up and extended his hand in a gesture of reconciliation. He was one of the most hated guards of the camp she’d been in.

She couldn’t take his hand. She prayed, “Jesus, help me! I can’t forgive him!”

Instantly, some higher power helped her to take his hand in forgiveness.

That night Corrie learned a great truth. The same Jesus who taught us to love our enemies empowers us to do it. All we need do is ask for the power.

### **Defining forgiveness—what it is and isn’t**

One thing that makes forgiveness *more* difficult than it might be is having misguided ideas about what forgiveness *is* and *is not*. In my book *How to Forgive Yourself and Others*, I differentiate between what forgiveness is and is not in the following way:

#### **What Forgiveness Isn’t**

- Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that we must forget a hurt or injustice. We often hear the advice “forgive and forget.” Some hurts are not possible to forget and sometimes it is not even wise to do so. They may be too heavy and painful to remove totally from our memory. What we can and should seek to do is to let go of the resentments connected with the hurt. If we don’t, these resentments will continue to wound *us*, cloud the way we see reality and control our actions. Also, while we may be able to totally forget some hurts, it is not necessarily wise to forget *all* hurts. We may need to remember some hurts to help us not to allow them to happen again. For example, if we do not remember how someone abused us, we run the risk of allowing such behavior to occur again. Also, remembering hurts that are forgiven and healed will enable us to offer understanding, compassion and help to others in need of healing.

- Forgiveness doesn’t mean that we surrender our right to justice. For example, if we know someone has cheated us of a lot of money, forgiveness doesn’t mean that we surrender our right to seek justice. The late Pope John Paul II forgave Ali Agca, the man who tried to kill him, but he didn’t request his release from jail. Neither did Nancy Harris ask that the killer of her husband and

daughter be freed. Forgiving someone who breaks our trust doesn't mean that we give him back his job. I sometimes say to people that we shouldn't confuse forgiveness with stupidity. Jesus did indeed ask us to forgive, but he didn't tell us to be foolish in our dealings with others.

- Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that we have to relate to or befriend our offender. This is especially true if our offender shows no sorrow or remorse for the wrong he/she has done. Of course some situations may demand that we try to relate well to our offender, e.g., a married couple or friend whom we desire to continue to have a relationship with. It is also desirable that divorced parents who have children, especially young ones, get along for the sake of the children. In the same vein, it is expedient that co-workers and parishioners get along for the sake of the community. The good news is that we can love and forgive without befriending our offender.

- Forgiveness doesn't require us to put up with intolerable behavior. If we are in an abusive situation with our spouse or someone else, whether it be on a regular basis or on occasion, we should do everything in our power to resist such behavior. Forgiveness does not ask that we become doormats for nasty people. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King taught their followers to resist those who did them wrong.

- Forgiveness doesn't mean *excusing*, *condoning* or *minimizing* the wrong inflicted on us. Jesus never suggested that we do any of the above. He only asks that we forgive.

- Forgiveness doesn't mean that we should never have negative feelings towards our offender. As we shall see later, there is a difference between *forgiveness* of a hurt and *total* healing of a hurt.

- Forgiveness does not mean that we have to *like* our offender. I doubt Jesus liked the Pharisees, yet I assume he forgave them for their offenses.

### What is forgiveness?

- Forgiveness is a *process* (which may take a day, a year or a lifetime) during which we seek to eliminate from our mind and heart all resentment and hurt that we harbor because of what someone did or said to us.

- Forgiveness is the spiritual surgery that we perform on ourselves (with the help of God's grace) to free ourselves from all the venom that is gnawing on us as a result of a hurt or injustice.

- Forgiveness is a gift we give ourselves so that we do not remain stuck in the past and in our pain, living as a victim of some big hurt or injustice. When we are able to forgive, we move from victim to hero.

*Forgiveness is the powerful assertion that bad things will not ruin your today even though they may have spoiled your past. (Jean Maalouf)*

We know that forgiveness is occurring or has occurred when we sense a peaceful distance—no longer a hostile one—between our offender and us. We know that forgiveness is occurring when we can pray for our offender, wish him/her well, and let go of all desire to get even.

### Forgiving an ongoing hurt

When it comes to the issue of forgiveness, one of the toughest areas to deal with is hurt resulting from an ongoing abuse by a spouse or at the workplace.

***Spousal abuse.*** While I think no one would expect someone to stay in a marriage where there is continuous emotional and/or physical abuse, sometimes leaving is not an option for financial reasons. What can one do in this situation? Some suggestions:

- If possible, fight back by speaking up. Jesus does not expect us to be a doormat in an abusive situation. He spoke up to Pilate. Sometimes a counselor or priest might be able to empower us to speak up.

- Read books that might spiritually sustain us when we are caught in a bad situation. One book recommendation is *Arise from Darkness—What To Do When Life Doesn't Make Sense* by Fr. Benedict Groeschel.

- Create a life apart from the abusive spouse by volunteering or having friends to do recreational things with.

***An abusive work situation.*** When abuse happens at the workplace, we should report the wrongdoing to our boss (hopefully he/she is not the offender!) or to Human Resources. Or perhaps we should look for a new job. But sometimes neither of these options are possible. What then?

- Pray for strength and guidance. Pray for the conversion of the abuser. Pray for strength to cope with the situation. When praying for guidance, we should be open to the Holy Spirit showing us how our attitude and behavior may need to change in some way.

- Be aware that we may be involved in a *spiritual warfare*—a situation in which the forces of darkness are attacking us and wanting to use this situation to make us bitter and discouraged in our relationship with God. We can spiritually arm ourselves by praying and asking others to pray for us or with us. Years ago, a man shared with me how he would cover himself with prayer as he walked into a bad work situation. He would also bind the spirit of abuse at work in his place of employment.

- We need to be aware that while God is certainly not the cause of any abusive behavior at home or at work, he is allowing it to happen to purify us and make us more like Jesus who himself had to endure much abuse in his time. A helpful book for people caught in a bad work situation might be *Darkness in the Marketplace* by Thomas Green, S.J.

If you have other suggestions on how to deal with either of the above situations, I would love to hear from you.

For your information, in addition to dealing with some of the material shared in this column, my book on forgiveness also has chapters on:

- Thirteen truths to remember about the forgiveness process
- Ten obstacles to forgiveness
- Concrete suggestions on how to pray for forgiveness
- Forgiving a deceased person, forgiving God and religious or secular institutions
- Forgiving yourself

Have a blessed week,

