

“As We Forgive”

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Matthew 6:9-15, Colossians 3:12-15a

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I feel like sometimes I spend my life asking others for forgiveness. It seems like I do so many things that I do not intend to do and even when I do things I believe to be helpful they are not received in that manner. For example, in a previous church that I served a member took me aside prior to worship to share a prayer concern with me and asked for prayer. I went into worship and offered prayers for her concern within the community of faith. I spent the next day seeking her forgiveness because even though I assumed her prayer was a request for our worship context ,(there is that wonderful word that gets me into trouble most of the time) she intended that prayer request to be offered in my own personal prayer time. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive others.”

On the other side of forgiveness, I remember the last time someone really hurt me. The pain cut deep. Not only was I hurt, I was humiliated. For a time, I was perpetually angry. Every time this person called, I had a few words under my breath because of course I am a pastor and I need to follow what I preach. Each conversation we had was dripping with discontent. I admit, for a little while, it felt good. “I’ll show them!” I thought. But that feeling was fleeting. Most days, the weight of the bitterness was just too much.

Even though I wanted that weight lifted, I felt like this person didn’t deserve forgiveness. I *could* forgive, I just didn’t *want* to. God is always ready to forgive just as we have been made to forgive each other. What was holding me back? I

couldn't ignore God... and God's Word is clear on this topic. Depending on what translation, the word "forgive" is mentioned at least 60 times in the Bible. I'm pretty sure God is telling us something. Right relationship involves getting honest with God and with each other.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus makes it clear that our forgiveness hinges on our willingness to forgive others. It is an important requirement for friendship with God and others, as well as for our own good health. The act of forgiving undergirds our physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. Refusal to forgive has huge negative effects on our physical health. Holding onto an offense, raises our blood pressure, upsets our digestive tract and disrupts our sleep.

Gina Manskar, asks: If forgiveness is so integral to our health, why do we hold so tightly to our anger making ourselves increasingly miserable? Forgiving is an arduous journey. It is a process of decision-making, risk-taking and trust. Yet, through forgiveness, we find freedom and peace. The unexpected outcome: a humbled and compassionate heart.

Unforgiveness is an ineffective weapon. We cling to it because it feels good. We want to feel powerful and in control over a person and an event as though that could make up for having no control in the first place. Eventually we realize that unforgiveness keeps us stuck – bound in disappointment, betrayal and victimization tied to the past. If we truly want to move on – to be free – we need to learn how to forgive.

Forgiveness does not let someone off the hook– it does not make what they did ok. Forgiveness is a sort of surrender - not surrender to someone or to circumstances, but a surrender to the wisdom and power of the divine. It is a process of letting go of the need to be in charge of someone's damnation and allowing God to be God.

Flora Slosson Wuellner in her book, Forgiveness, the Passionate Journey, suggests that it is critical that we do not rush forgiveness, especially when we have been deeply hurt. One of the greatest blocks to healthy forgiveness is trying to push too quickly past our emotional pain when we have been hurt. It is scary to name our hurt. It is painful to let ourselves feel the suffering from a past or present wound, to feel the pain, to admit that we are not the invulnerable, woundable person we thought we were. We know that our God is a forgiving God, who is merciful beyond our understanding. Yet, for us it is difficult to forgive others because we carry hurt and anger as burdens of this world.

Jesus reminds us and demonstrates by his forgiving again and again. (70 X 7)  
We need to prepare our hearts to receive forgiveness by forgiving those who hurt us, right now. Yet we cling to our wounded self. It even seems at times, that our identity is given by the very persons and ways in which they wounded us. A part of each of us is the wounded one. It is hard to know who one is when one can no longer point a finger at someone who is the cause of one's pain!  
Making sacred space for genuine mourning over our wounds is essential within the journey of healthy forgiveness. Healthy forgiveness takes time!

In our humanness is imperfection and Henri Nouwen reminds us that, “our first Love, the love of the one who calls us the beloved ones and offers us complete

communion, does not wound us. God's love is not limited by needs and unfulfilled desires. It is love freely given without strings attached. When we claim that first love as real, and not just wishful thinking, we begin to live joyfully in a world where love is, and can only be, offered to us in a limited and conditional way, even by those who love us most.

What might happen if we began at this very moment to we realize that we are beloved long before anyone accepted or rejected us? What if our true name is not the name given to us by those whose limited love could not avoid hurting us? What if our true home is not where we live in an unforgiving space, but the sacred place in unconditional love of the One whose being is pure love? Would there be any reason to cling to our negative feeling? Would not forgiveness be the easier response?

This perspective does not underestimate the importance of exploring and understanding our suffering...But there is a step beyond the recognition and identification of the facts of life... It is the step of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that we all love poorly at times. We don't even know what we are doing when we hurt others. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour – unceasingly. Those who claim Jesus as Lord, are a part of the “age of the Messiah” – which is the age of forgiveness. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family, God's chosen ones.

*Colossians 3:12-15a* <sup>12</sup>*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.* <sup>13</sup>*Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you*

*also must forgive.* <sup>14</sup>*Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.* <sup>15</sup>*And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.*

Forgiveness is a spiritual experience, ultimately. We pray for God's acceptance of us in the future age of salvation while we ask God's help to open our hearts to live forgiveness in the here and now. We pray so that we signal to God and to ourselves that we're listening and ready to hear what God has to say to us. Prayer is not so much about changing God as it is sometimes about changing us. It is a way of living God's kingdom into the present. Let God's kingdom come! Amen.