

## THE WILL TO FORGIVE: A PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL VIEW OF FORGIVING

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Defines forgiving as a process of reframing in which the restoration of integrity to one's self and one's relationships to others and to God is a central process. Sees this process of forgiving in four stages (1) judgment vs denial, (2) humility vs humiliation, (3) opportunity of mutuality and negotiation, and (4) actualization of a new sense of awareness and perception. Provides cases illustrating the will to forgive and the failure of the will to forgive.

**F**orgiving is not for the weak-hearted or those who seek easy answers. Forgiving is indeed one of the truly courageous acts of the will. Forgiving is a power that challenges one to grow. Yet no one escapes the call to forgive or is exempt from the need for the healing that forgiving provides. The pastoral counselor is called upon to interpret the process of forgiving and to facilitate that process in the lives of those who seek his or her expertise.

The other day a client expressed to me in terms of urgency and with feelings of deep turmoil, "He's certainly not asked for forgiveness, but I need and want to forgive him so I can get on with my life." In another hour I worked with a couple that had been seeking to find healing and relief from the pain of a wounded marriage. In the midst of hurt feelings, unmet needs and repressed anger, the wife had entered into an affair but was unable to find solutions to her suffering and sought reconciliation with her husband. A similar issue presents itself in different dynamics: children grow up and seek to forgive their parents for being inadequate, less than perfect, or even abusive; an adolescent feels the pain of failure or poor judgment and gets depressed from the tyranny of an unforgiving spirit towards one's self; a person feels a loneliness and isolation from God because the shame and guilt of wrong doing stores up in one's secret self to the point that one feels self-hatred and seeks to avoid God, the church, and those closest to him or her.

The fact is that for most of us we know a lot more about the need for forgiveness than we know about the power to forgive. Perhaps that's because many of us know more about our kinship with Adam and Eve than we may know about our kinship with Christ. But it's not that simple.

The church is the forgiven community and the forgiving community. To be a Christian is to know one's own undoneness and one's own need for forgiveness. It is also to be a participant in the power of forgiving and healing. Forgiving was certainly central to the pastoral ministry of Jesus. Forgiving continues to be central to the Christian mission of the church and to the healing process. We are each called to be agents of forgiving in the process of caring for one another.

### **False Notions of Forgiving**

I suspect forgiving is difficult for most of us because in part we have learned and experienced distortions or ineffective notions of what it means to forgive someone. Often, we deny that we are truly offended or wounded and act like such denial is forgiving or we may choose to "be nice" and avoid a confrontation in the name of forgiveness. These tactics can ultimately result in seething anger, resentment, hatred and bearing a secret grudge that ultimately seeks revenge. "Giving in" is a false type of forgiveness. In its extreme, "giving in" as forgiveness leads to a masochistic martyrdom that undermines one's self-esteem and personal integrity. Also, the ritualistic "giving in" to an offered apology seems to be a type of forgiving that appears to be an automatic response that one is obliged to provide. This automatic response takes on a magical quality which suggests that things are suddenly and finally made right again. But beyond these methods of "cheap forgiveness," I detect deep within us resistances to forgiving that are rooted in our most sinful and pathological selves.

### **Resistances to Forgiving**

The presence and power of self-righteousness resides in everyone. At times, self-righteousness makes us feel special, and it covers feelings of inadequacy, failure with pride and an inflated sense of perfection. Often when affronted we defend ourselves from humiliation by reacting with pride and self-justification. This reaction instills within us a sense of power and control which seeks to purify our unbridled projections of sin onto others. Another resistance to forgiving surfaces when fear of the unknown faces us and one is unsure about life going on. A further resistance to forgive is encountered when one seeks to hold control over someone else through the manipulation of accusation, guilt induction and relational blackmail. The need to control another in these ways reflects an exaggerated sense of power that tends towards sadism. It is a way to avoid not only one's own responsibilities but also one's own capacities to grow and to be sustained.

Finally, I suspect that one's experience of being forgiven predisposes one's capacity to offer it to another. There is a tendency in us to do unto others as we have been done unto. In deep ways we learn patterns of

forgiving as we move from infancy to being a toddler, to becoming a lively child and on into the unpredictable lands of adolescence. From those developmental years we encounter fair and unfair experiences, we learn forgiveness, and we feel its absence. To some extent, we are all limited by our own experiences.

### **A Definition of Forgiving**

Having identified what forgiveness is not and some of the resistances within us to being forgiving and to forgive, I now am faced with the difficult task of describing what forgiveness is and how it can become a more effective dynamic in our lives. Forgiving is a process whereby one changes, grows and evolves into a more mature individual characterized by deepened self-awareness. Forgiveness is the intentional relating and renewed humility in the grace of God. In order to overcome being sinned against, one has to grow through it as forgiving demands a lot from the forgiver. To forgive means that a person needs to confront his or her own feelings, values, impulses and needs as well as one's own inclinations towards pride and self-righteousness. The forgiver faces his or her own demands for perfection—both for himself or herself as well as the irrational demands for others to relate perfectly to oneself and to fulfill one's needs. Forgiveness involve confronting one's own level of maturity, state of sinfulness, imperfection and irresponsibility. This process permits the sin to bring about new bases for understanding one's self and one's on-going relation to others under God.

I have come to understand forgiving as a process that is akin to what psychology refers to as reframing.<sup>1</sup> By reframing is meant that process whereby feelings and conceptualizations pertaining to an event change thereby altering the meaning and consequences of that event in the life of a person. The facts or givenness of an event in life cannot be changed, but it is not the concrete facts of an event that give us trouble. Rather, it is an evolvment of the feelings and concepts associated to an event that brings about a change in one's perceived feelings, meaning of the event and the consequences that follow.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Process of Forgiving**

I hesitate to describe the process of forgiving as I have come to understand it because I fear that the process will be perceived as a mechanistic ritual which can be prescribed or followed as a computer program that

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Dr. John Patton for suggesting the relation between forgiving and reframing in his presentation "Is Forgiveness Possible?," presented at the AAPC Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, in April, 1983

<sup>2</sup>Paul Watzlawich, John Weakland, and Richard Fisch, *Change Principles of Formation and Problem Resolution* (New York, NY WW Norton & Co , 1974), p 95

always produces desired and measured results. The stages of forgiving are not mechanistic steps anymore than there are set stages for dying or grieving. The four stages of the forgiving process are cyclical rather than linear. They intertwine with each other, and they all demand repeating, maybe even as many times as seventy times seven!

The first stage I refer to as the judgment vs. denial stage. In this stage one is confronted with the reality of sin and being sinned against. One is faced with the reality of the affront, the betraying of trust, the brokenness of a relationship, the brokenness of promises, or the reality of destructive behavior towards one's self. One experiences feelings of hurt and anger accompanied with feelings of self-protectiveness and revenge. By judgment I do not mean to imply placing oneself in the position of power to ascertain blame and punishment. Rather, I mean to suggest opening oneself to the realities that have occurred and the consequences that have arrived. Forgiving is not a nice and neat endeavor to undertake. On the contrary, it means a willingness to dirty oneself with realities that are painful in others as well as in one's self.

The second stage is referred to as the humility vs. humiliation stage. When affronted and wounded many of us have a tendency to internalize the injury and turn it against ourselves in ways that result in the painful state of humiliation which produces the view of one's self and one's offender as adversarial and alien to one another. However, in the spirit and will to forgive, tension arises to develop and recognize a state of humility that counters humiliation.

Humility is characterized by an awareness of one's need for forgiveness in light of one's own imperfections, vulnerabilities and tendencies towards meanness and insensitivity. Humility is the product of owning one's own grandiosity and self-righteousness. Humility enables a person to perceive the offender from a perspective of empathy and an openness towards understanding and compassion. I do not mean to imply, however, that humility is characterized by permissiveness and a denial of the real consequences of behavior and attitudes. It is rather a more clear and certain look at the realities of life occurrences and the consequences that result.

The third stage is designated as the opportunity of mutuality and negotiation. In this stage the forgiver becomes different; he or she becomes open to change and growth. He or she becomes free from the need to accuse and the compelling needs to punish and to seek revenge. In confronting one's own needs for forgiveness, one experiences a new resource which enables him or her to reframe the affront. The sinful or destructive behavior takes on a new meaning and a new perspective is developed that reorients the person in life and in relation to the offender.

Likewise in this stage the forgiven one also becomes different. The forgiven one becomes free to experience real guilt feelings and suffering which come from having wronged another. As a consequence, he or she can deal constructively with the wrongs and ultimately be freed from them. The forgiven one moves away from defensiveness, denials and reprisals. He or she is confronted with a humility that allows him or her to own sinfulness without the fear of humiliation, condemnation and total estrangement. At this stage the forgiving process can become a mutual experience of healing and reconciliation. However, it is not essential that the offender participate in the process in order for the forgiving person to experience the freedom and healing of letting go of the affront and its painful consequences.

The fourth stage of forgiving is characterized by the actual living out of the forgiving process where perspectives on one's self, others and God take place. This stage of forgiving is the ongoing process of redefining one's relationship with the offender based upon a developing awareness of one's self and the offender. It is being aware not only of his or her limitations and capacities for sin and evil, but also of his or her kinship and commonality in humanness under God. Here, relationships are renegotiated with new promises made and new covenants formed. In other cases, it can be the ending of a relationship that is mutually or unilaterally determined. In the process of forgiving, the person experiences a freedom and power to disentangle one's self from another, and thereby to move on in his or her life unencumbered with the weight of life frozen in humiliation, hatred and estrangement.

I do not mean to imply that this stage is characterized by resolved ambivalences and the disappearance of deep wounds. On the contrary, this stage is more often identified by the willingness of a person to live "as if" he or she has forgiven another. This is not a call for denial or a plea for fantasy. Rather, it is a realistic acceptance that we all live with scars that are tender and often easily opened. This stage is characterized by a deepened knowledge of one's ability to be hurt and healed. The reframing that is a result of forgiving enables one to live with one's hurt and wounds and not be enslaved to them. The process of forgiving culminates in the courage to accept the realities of one's life and to move on in faith and humility.

### **The Will to Forgive and The Process of Forgiving: A Case Study**

Describing and defining forgiveness raises two related issues for consideration. The first question is, "What is the relation between the act of forgiving and the process of forgiving?" and the second question is, "What is the role of one's will in the dynamics of forgiving?" The first issue can best be addressed through the use of a brief case illustration.

Bill and Jane Dean came to me upon referral from their pastor. They were in the midst of a marital crises that presented itself when Jane confessed to Bill that she had been involved in a brief sexual affair with a man who worked with her in a real estate firm. Bill and Jane were in their early to mid-forties and had been married just over twenty years. Bill had worked hard establishing his own car dealership and had been financially and professionally successful. Jane began her professional career only two years prior to our meeting. She had elected to “stay at home and raise their two children” which she had done with charm and sensitivity. Bill and Jane were quite active in church and social activities. They had experienced a constant security in and commitment to their marriage even though there had been some long stretches of relational boredom and empty spaces between them.

Bill and Jane were fairly sophisticated persons with remarkable levels of self awareness and realistic views of the world. They came to counseling not out of a shock and panic from the affair, but out of a frustration and hurt that they were not able to “get over it” and “move on together.” The agreed upon pastoral and therapeutic task was to “get unstuck,” to identify and explore the impasse in their relationship, and to discover the fixation that held them both in unresolved pain and sorrow.

After going through the necessary background information Bill expressed the guts of the impasse: “Jane told me she is sorry and I believe her. I want it to be okay, and I tell her that it is, but down deep inside it’s just not. We both know it, but we feel powerless to do anything about it. She feels bad and so do I.” What is revealed in his statement appears not only to be a clear view of a misunderstood yet traditionally accepted magical notion of forgiving, but also the relationship between the act of forgiving and the process of forgiving. Forgiving is a punctilious event, a decision, an act of the will and perhaps only a wish that it could be so in reality. In sum, it is a critical moment of commitment.

My response to Bill was, “So, do you want to forgive her, to work out the forgiving healing that she seeks between you?” Bill’s response was, “Yes.” My response followed, “Then our task is to work it out, to find it and to develop it between you the best that we can.” The point is that there is a key relationship between the act of forgiving—whether it be in a form of only a wish that it could be so or in the form of a conviction or a determination that it become so—and the resulting process of forgiving which may result into a resolve that is yet unknown and unpredictable. There are no guarantees as to the nature and content of the outcome of the forgiving process.

The process of working out forgiveness between Jane and Bill was a most enlightening journey for all of us. Bill and Jane had a tendency to deny their primitive feelings of anger, ownership and jealousy. Bill met his

feelings of humiliation with a confession of his own, that he had wanted to have affairs but always lacked the courage to do so. He found a new ground on which to accept Jane and understand her. She felt acceptance from Bill and a new sense of maturity in herself. Because of their high level of motivation and commitment, they were able to mutually renegotiate their relationship based on a more profound awareness of each other's autonomy and identity needs. It is my opinion that had Bill and Jane not undergone the rigors of forgiving each other, their relationship would have disintegrated, and both would have suffered from feelings of depression, self-hatred, abandonment and resentment.

### **The Dynamics of the Will in Forgiving**

The major issue of the role of the will in the dynamics of forgiving is greatly enlightened by contrasting the notions of willfulness and willingness. Gerald May poignantly delimits these two conceptualizations in his book, *Will and Spirit*. According to May, "Willingness implies a surrendering of one's self-separateness, an entering-into, an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself. It is a realization that one already is a part of some ultimate cosmic process and it is a commitment to participate in that process."<sup>3</sup> He goes on to contrast willfulness by saying, "the setting of oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to master, direct, control, or otherwise manipulate existence."<sup>4</sup> It is through these insights that the notion of *pastoral* psychotherapy becomes crucial in facilitating forgiving as a part of the human condition of brokenness and healing.

The role of the will understood in terms of willingness is crucial in the process of forgiving and in moving towards healing and wholeness. Willingness is the capacity to seek and live in harmony and union with the Will of God. This response enables forgiveness to become a reality. By contrast, it is each person's natural tendency to move toward willfulness that restricts the self-transforming process of forgiving. Willfulness causes one to hold on to narcissistic wounds and to deny and defy the notion of willingness. It is a narcissistic holding on to one's own demands in dispute with God. Willfulness takes the form of demanding revenge or proclaiming self-righteousness. Ironically, willfulness can produce a pseudo-forgiveness that claims for oneself the power to forgive and to dispense mercy as one who righteously doles out such gifts from on high. Forgiving in this mode avoids self-confrontation, humility and the self-transformation that comes from knowing one's self as broken, alienated from God and in need of care.

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<sup>3</sup>Gerald May, *Will and Spirit* (San Francisco, CA Harper and Row, 1982), p 6

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*

Of course, each of us at some time or other struggles with the tension between wilfulness and willingness. As I see it, the unique pastoral therapeutic task is to undergo a careful analysis of the will in our clients and in ourselves as we struggle to experience forgiveness as well as be agents of its power to heal. Another brief case illustration can help elucidate the role of the will in the dynamics of forgiving. This case illustrates the intense struggle to forgive and the painful lack of a capacity for willingness which blocks forgiveness from taking place.

### **The Failure of the Will to Forgive: A Case Study**

Ann was a forty-one year old divorced female who on the surface appeared to be quite attractive, engaging and delightfully self-assured. She was abandoned after a nineteen year marriage by a man who had related to her primarily out of a passive-aggressive and dependent posture. Ann had adjusted to her divorce and in the three years that followed established a durable if somewhat troubled relationship with a man who offered much of the same kind of relational dynamics as her prior husband. Ann suffered a grave injury when she discovered that her best female friend had engaged in a brief sexual affair with Ann's lover after Ann had confided in her friend about the stress she and her lover were experiencing due to his flirtations with other women.

Upon discovering this betrayal of trust, Ann became quite obsessed with anger and the insatiable need for revenge. She would lie awake nights fantasizing angry confrontations and inflicting bodily injury to her now ex-friend and most hated enemy. It seemed that her obsession for revenge was undaunted and found no satisfaction. Ann acknowledged that her preoccupation was excessive, unrelenting and frightening. After several months of working through extensive background material and analyzing her obsessions and obsessive nature, I suggested that Ann might consider forgiving her friend as a way out of her own torment and unrested anguish. Her first reaction was to become quite angry with me and accuse me of short-sighted piety and simplistic religious answers to obviously complex troubles. Following that reaction came a long and painful process of exploring her own deprivations and the inexperience of ever having been forgiven.

Ann was a woman who worked as an accountant. She survived by the power of calculation and careful determination. Life on the basis of compassion was foreign and care was untrustworthy. Ann's self-esteem was painfully low as she described herself as being invisible and totally forgettable. Her mother was seen as being always a disgruntled and unhappy woman who was never satisfied. Upon inquiry Ann indicated that her mother demonstrated no capacity or even will to forgive. Her mother carried a grudge and sought to even the score with anyone who in any

way did her wrong. Her mother lived in a world of black and white, and she alone could make an accurate accounting. Ann's father was experienced as a benign yet weak man who could not deal with his wife in ways other than by capitulation and withdrawal.

Upon reflection and review Ann grew in her awareness of how she lacked experiences of forgiveness. She developed in turn a very limited capacity to forgive. Her narcissistic needs were so compelling that she had a limited capacity to see beyond her own wounds and her own demands for control and attention which ultimately contributed to her own pain and defeat in life. Ann had little hope that life could ever be different or that she could learn to trust. Ann resisted the possibility of forgiving either her lover or her friend. The notion of experiencing healing and turning into something new and different was foreign to her experience in life.

Ann did not have a religious tradition to draw upon to provide a view of life or a sense of hope and promise. She had no sense of ritual that spoke in the language of symbol that could confront and transform her in deep and meaningful ways. Even the possibility of entertaining the posture of willingness was threatening to Ann's desperate hold to willfulness as a way of life in defensive and frantic search for safety. In her obsessions Ann had no sense of life being greater than her injuries.

Even though the dynamics of forgiving was a small part of the therapeutic process for Ann, they did prove to be rather dramatic doorways which led to growth and healing albeit fraught with pain. Likewise, the role of her will in its defiant yet frightened stance of willfulness betrayed her alienation and need for a more healthy relationship with God.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I find it important to refocus and restate that forgiving does not restore innocence. It does, however, restore integrity to one's self and one's relationships to others and to God. It at times restores and renews relationships. It at times frees one to end relationships or at least turn them loose in ways that makes the brokenness more meaningful and manageable to carry. Forgiving is an act of the will that seeks wholeness and opens one's self to the expensive process of change and transformation. It is a process of willing that allows one to be less wilful, less demanding and less dogmatic. Forgiving is a process whereby one is restored in a relationship with God that gracefully comes as a harmony with life and a renewed courage to be vital and live in risk. It is an experience that confirms us in the knowledge that as we forgive, we are forgiven.



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