

“Not 7 Times – But 70 x 7 Times!”

Take a minute for reflection: Is there a person or persons in your life that you are unable to forgive? Who are the persons in your life that you are able to forgive? Are there persons that you are *struggling in not being able* to forgive?

Let me share a story – the essence of which we have heard many times:

Betsy was devastated when her husband left her for another woman. Like many who have been betrayed, she was angry, resentful and bitter. As time went on, the pain within increased and consumed her.

Her spiritual counselor and therapist suggested to Betsy that she forgive her husband for his actions. Betsy was stunned!

“Forgive him?! Are you crazy? I’ll die first! I want to get even! *I want him to her like I hurt!*”

As she spoke, her face took on a frightening look. Clearly she was consumed with resentment and revenge when she screamed one last time: *“How can you tell me to forgive him?”*

The spiritual counselor answered:

“I’m not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable – it wasn’t. It was mean and selfish. I’m asking you to forgive because he doesn’t deserve the power to live in your head and *turn you* into a bitter, angry person. I’d like to see him *out of your life emotionally as he is out of the physical...*; but by being so angry and vengeful *you keep holding on to him!* You are not hurting him by holding onto your resentment... *you’re hurting yourself... .”*

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Sisters and brothers, most of us have – to one extent or another – been where Betsy is at. Un-forgiveness is a terrible place to be and we all know folks who have carried that un-forgiveness to their grave.

So, if we’re in that place, what can we do? How can we recover? How might we help others we love who are in that place of un-forgiveness?

Well, as Disciples of Jesus, we know that his teachings on the need to forgive are *clear* and *essential*: forgiveness runs through the teachings of Jesus, forgiveness is an essential trait on our journey of authentic discipleship:

- The Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our trespasses – as we forgive those who trespass against us;"
- Matthew 14: "If you forgive others when they sin against you; God will forgive you!"
- Mark 11: "When you stand to pray if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them that God may forgive you."
- Jesus on the Cross: "Father forgive them; they don't know what they're doing..."
- Matthew 5: "If you're offering your gift at the altar and remember that someone has something against you – leave your gift in front of the altar; go and be reconciled – then offer your gift."
- Luke 6: "Forgive and you will be forgiven."
- and Peter, in today's Gospel: "How many times should I forgive someone? Seven times?" The answer given by Jesus is: "...seventy *TIMES* seven"!

When it comes to forgiveness, nothing is watered down by Jesus and there are no loopholes!

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We might be sitting here thinking: "Well, that's all well and good; easy to say... but how tough it is to do! It seems like I've been trying to forgive forever... but it just *isn't happening*. What do I do? How do I get out of the trap of un-forgiveness?"

When all is said and done, *forgiveness is not something we do but something that happens to us* ... it is grace. But the spiritual giants point out that what makes forgiveness so difficult – often lies in *our misunderstanding regarding forgiveness* – misunderstanding involving our ideas of what forgiveness is not:

A few examples:

1) *Forgiveness is not forgetting*. When we are deeply hurt, like Betsy was, "forgive and forget" is not possible. It is unhealthy and unrealistic to try to forget or minimize hurts just as it is unhealthy and unrealistic to brood over them. When a person says, "I can never forgive what she did to me," they usually mean, "I can never forget what she did to me." Forgiveness is not forgetting!

2) *Forgiveness does not mean that we minimize or condone what the person did. When someone hurt us – they hurt us!* How often people in the cycle of abuse try to minimize or even condone, what the perpetrator is doing! Forgiveness is not condoning, nor is it a heroic acceptance of past hurts that must be embraced for life to go on.

3) *Forgiveness is not absolution.* When we forgive, we are *not* letting someone 'off the hook:' they must still answer for what they have done... to you, to society, to themselves and to God. Only God gives absolution. *I forgive you* for stealing — but *you still owe me* the \$100!

4) Jesus – and all the spiritual giants – teach us that forgiveness is not primarily for them... the 'other'... the offender; but for me. If Betsy is ultimately able to forgive, it is *primarily a gift of freedom for her.* Forgiveness is not dependent on who the perpetrator is or what he or she did to me or even, *if they think they're getting off Scott free.* I forgive primarily for myself not for them.

What forgiveness *is*:

One: *Forgiveness is a form of realism.* When we forgive, we enable ourselves to look squarely at our wounds and their scars. We see how much energy we have wasted *by not forgiving* and we realize how much we have going for ourselves as we move on with our lives.

Two: *Forgiveness means we no longer need to take revenge on our offenders...* it's often impossible anyway. Now our life-energy is freed for better things, more positive ways of enhancing our lives. "An eye for an eye" *does not return our own loss.* Gandhi said that 'if we all live by an eye for an eye... the whole world would be blind!'

Three: *Forgiveness allows us to realize that we are more than victim of abuse and injustice.* We don't need our *hatreds, resentments and brooding over wrongs.* Forgiveness gives us power and freedom over ourselves and others.

Four: *Forgiveness is the decision that we have done enough futile hating, suffering and fantasizing over revenge!* Forgiveness is a realization that *we have hurt ourselves enough* in un-forgiveness that has in no way affected the offender; we are through hurting ourselves; we are going to stop being the child who "goes out to eat worms to get back at his parents"!

Five: *Forgiveness is true freedom that releases us from being stuck to a cruel event of our past which had stopped the progress of our lives.* We become free to pursue real growth ... to become more the person God created us to be!

Finally: *Forgiveness is a process – it takes time – it is a healing.* Forgiveness is something that *happens to us* – often little-by-little... .

The Spiritual Giants tell us that there is something we can all do right away:

- 1) Pray for the grace to forgive... ask God for the grace. Pray that your heart be open to the grace ...
- 2) When the pain overwhelms us — pray for the person who hurt us. As tough as this sounds... this prayer can be an ointment soothing our pain ...
- 3) I would add a third step: for serious hurts, we need help, we can't do it alone. Spiritual guides, counselors, therapists are often critical in the process.

Finally, think of forgiveness as “letting go:” “Let go and let God”! In an upcoming Parish Newsletter, I will share the titles of three books that I have found very helpful in this process.

Sister Joan Chittister OSB, shares an important insight:

*“If anything proves the God-ness of Jesus, if anything calls for the divine in ourselves, it is the words on the Cross that beg forgiveness for the unforgivable. Now for our own sake, as well as for the rest of the world – it’s our turn to forgive.”*

Amen!