

# The Power of Forgiveness

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**YOU COULD SAY** that among the most powerful of human experiences is to give or to receive forgiveness. I am told that two-thirds of the teaching of Jesus is directly or indirectly about this mystery of forgiveness, God's breaking of God's own rules. That's not surprising, because forgiveness is probably the only human action that *reveals three goodnesses simultaneously!* When we forgive, we choose the goodness of the other over their faults, we experience God's goodness flowing through ourselves and we also experience our own goodness in a way that almost surprises us. That is an awesome coming together of power, both human and divine.

I want to share with you a personal story of forgiveness that happened in my family near the time of my mother's death. I was supposed to travel home, back to Kansas, thinking my mother would already be gone by then and we'd have the funeral. We had spent many good visits together during her final days and she seemed ready to go. After hearing that she was hanging on, I delayed my trip for a few days. I didn't expect what happened when I got there.

I was sitting by the bed of my mother and I told her how I'd miss her. Now, as I have described before, this earthy, farming woman was no sentimentalist. All of a sudden she said to me, "I want to hear it from him." And I said, "What?"

She: "Him."

I: "You mean Daddy?"

She: "Yeah, I want to hear if he's going to miss me."

So I ran over to my father, at that point a man of eighty-four, whom we still call "Daddy." For weeks, months he had been telling her that he would miss her, but she wanted to hear it one more time from him. So I said, "Daddy, she wants to hear that you're going to miss her." He

came over and effusively told her, “Oh, I’m gonna miss ya.”

She replied, “I don’t believe it.”

I couldn’t believe my ears! I said, “Mother, you’re a few hours from death. You can’t say that!”

She persisted: “I don’t believe it.”

Daddy redoubled his efforts: “I ask your forgiveness for all the times I’ve hurt you in our fifty-four years of marriage and I forgive you for the times you’ve hurt me.” I said, “Mother, isn’t that beautiful. Now, say that back to Daddy.” And suddenly she clammed up. She didn’t want to say it. (Typical Enneagram eight!)

I never felt more the priest. Here I had to coach my own mother. I said, “Mother, you’re soon going to be before God. You don’t want to come before God without forgiving everybody.”

She said, “I forgive everybody.”

I said, “But do you forgive Daddy?” and she became silent again.

Then Daddy jumps in he says, “Honey, I never fooled around with any other women.”

We all knew that. She even said, “Well I know that, I know that.”

My siblings and I still don’t know what the big thing was. But any married person knows there are many little ways a couple hurt one another over fifty-four years. There are little grudges, perhaps even big ones, which you hold. So I told her, “Mother you know the Our Father. You’re only going to get as much forgiveness from God as you’ve given. Now, you’ve got to forgive Daddy.”

She kept her eyes closed. I pulled every Christian trick out of the bag, but she kept her eyes closed. Nothing was working.

Then I said, “Mother, let’s try this, I’m going to put one hand on your heart and I’m going to pray that your heart gets real soft.” I held her other hand and I started kissing it while I held the other hand over her heart.

After about a minute she said, very faintly, “That melts me.”

I: “What?”

She: “When you kiss my hand like that, now I’ve got to do it.”

After a pause she continued: “I’m a stubborn woman, all my life I’ve been a stubborn woman.”

“Well, Mother, we all knew that,” I said. “Now look at Daddy and you tell him.”

So she looked over and she didn’t say “Daddy,” as she usually did. She spoke to him by name: “Rich, I forgive you.” (His name was Richard, too.)

I prompt her again: “Mother, the other half—I ask for your forgive-

ness.”

She started breathing really quick, breathing so heavily I thought it was the end. Then she summoned her energy. She said, “Rich, I ask your forgiveness.” She continued with the heavy breathing. And she said, “That’s it, that’s it. That’s what I had to do.”

She had been talking for days during the previous week about “a mesh.” I couldn’t understand what it was. She had said, “There’s a mesh that I’m trying to get through.” Now I said to her, “Mother, do you think that was the mesh?” She replied, “It’s gone! The mesh is gone! And, God, I pray that I mean this forgiveness from my heart.” This was only four days before she died.

Now that might seem like a tiny thing, but that’s the way that we can be clogged up, the way we can be blocked. Then she said, referring to my two sisters and my sisters-in-law, “Tell the girls to do this early and not to wait ‘til now. They’ll understand a woman’s heart and the way a man can hurt a woman.”

I’m not sure, but I think all of this might have come from an old quarrel over something most of us would consider insignificant. But as married people know, some of those struggles carry a deeper symbolic meaning in the relationship. All we knew was that Daddy occasionally ran over her flowers with the lawnmower! She claimed it was intentional, and we ourselves sometimes wondered. He was the grass man and she was the flower woman, and they both fought for more space. I suppose it was a symbol of something much deeper in their souls—not hard to figure out, and on that level little things can, in fact, be quite deep and significant. Symbols perhaps, but symbolic action is often the real action, especially it seems to many women.

Whatever it had been about, I was utterly happy. I said, “Aren’t you glad you said it, Mother?” She said, “I’m so happy, I’m so happy.” My sister came in a few minutes later and before I had a chance to tell her the conversation, she had talked to mother and then she came running back to me. She said, “Mother says the mesh is gone and that she’s so happy.”

That’s the power and the grace of forgiveness. In my own life, and with my own stalwart mother.

But let’s do it *now* and not wait until later! Let’s ask for the grace to let go of those grudges and those hurts that we hold onto. How else will we ever be free? Let’s live inside of that wonderful good news that says with Saint Catherine of Genoa, “My deepest me is God!” We have come forth from God, we are sons and daughters and heirs of something that we did not create. In forgiveness we live up to our truest dig-

nity, we operate by a power not our own. We live out of the True Self and not just the tiny self that is always offended and complaining. This is the genuinely new thing that true believers have to offer the world.

## We Are 'Like' God

David Tracy, one of the best theologians on the American scene, wrote a book called *The Analogical Imagination* (Crossroad, 1985). With great scholarship he concludes that “the great Catholics,” who’ve really been transformed by their catholic worldview, have an “analogical” way of seeing reality. They see God and their own reality as analogous, or “like.” It is the result of the Catholic/Christian emphasis on Incarnation, I believe. It always sees heaven and earth as mirroring each another, not distinct, but in fact most similar. “As above, so below,” we would say; or if you argue from the other side, “As below, so above.” In either case you have a wonderfully coherent and sacramental universe.

The Catholic mind, at least in its heyday, represented “the analogical imagination.” It was always emphasizing, “God is like..., God is similar..., We are image of..., God is the same as...” (Saint Bonaventure’s “*vestigia Dei*,” from the previous chapter, the very fingerprints of God). All the world is a poem about God; all of reality is an analogy for God. And this, of course, had a good side and a bad side. The good side was you could be at home in the real world. The “actual” was the place of grace, not the idealized or “religious” world.

You’ll still see this in Mediterranean Catholic countries, where the Catholic imagination took the strongest hold on culture. They don’t apologize for fiestas and holidays, for drinking, eating, sex and dancing. That was still a bit shadowy to the Nordic Catholics, the Teutonic and Anglo-Saxon types—they never really got the humorous, ironic side of human existence, so well summarized in the jingle, “Wherever the Catholic sun does shine, there is singing and dancing and good red wine. At least the Bible tells me so, *Benedicamus Domino*.” Ironically, this was written by an English Catholic, Hilaire Belloc.

David Tracy claimed that, in general, the Protestant mind, and the Jewish mind, too, imagine things differently. They tend to emphasize *the difference* between God and the world. In the Protestant case, you can see it in the theology of Karl Barth and many of the Swiss reformers, who continuously emphasize the “otherness of God.” You certainly see that same emphasis on transcendence in much Jewish spirituality, too: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts.” The Incarnation would be unthinkable to the normal Jew, which is why it is still so strange that

it happened there! As always, we both have part of the truth. God is both immanent (present in the world) and transcendent (beyond ordinary experience) in good theology, it seems to me. We Catholics emphasized the immanence for good and for ill; Protestants and Jews, and Moslems too, emphasized transcendence for good and for ill.

The bad side was that Catholicism tended to get pretty slack. God was almost too chummy and forgiving. That's what our Protestant brothers and sisters rightly challenged us on. At one point, two-thirds of the year was feast days and holidays in Italy. Talk about the opposite of the Protestant work ethic! All they did was party! Life meant being at home in this world with God and one another, and our bodies. The Catholic comfort with drinking is still scandalous to many of our Protestant brothers and sisters. But Catholic countries are also notorious for tolerating dictators, political corruption, bribes, greedy upper classes and non-democratic/non-accountable leadership. Our political record is put to shame by clear-headed Anglo-Saxon and Protestant respect for law and accountability. God at a distance and God as policeman does have its social merits.

There has always been a kind of cultural Catholicism which doesn't really take the Gospels seriously (we did not even read them!), or take Jesus' teaching very seriously (we preferred saccharine Sacred Heart novenas), yet at the same time it often produced very compassionate and forgiving people. It retained a kind of mysticism that was lost elsewhere. Protestantism always seemed to produce people who were filled with judgments and criticisms of everything, yet it also produced people much more submitted to the concrete teaching of Jesus and much more socially responsible, in my opinion: the Mennonites on simple living; the Quakers on war; the Lutherans on grace; the Pentecostals on the Holy Spirit; the Amish, Congregationalists and Presbyterians on different aspects of practical community; the Holiness Churches on sheer joy in God.

The analogical imagination at its best creates very patient and less judgmental people. I think they feel less judged by God and tend to be more tolerant of others. It's "forgive us as we forgive them" kind of thinking. Perhaps it's nowhere better symbolized in literature than Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*. Greene was a great Catholic in his imaginal world, as were Walker Percy, Victor Hugo, François Mauriac and Flannery O'Connor. They lived and wrote out of the analogical imagination. Perhaps you remember the hero of Greene's novel, "the whiskey priest," the drunk! But Greene makes him dear, a saint, an everyman. "He could still put God on men's tongues": That

was the shocking idea. God uses sinners, which is all of us. The whiskey priest was still the mediator between God and humanity, drunk or not. The people still kissed his hand knowing his sin, but knowing that God forgives all sin, that we all are sinners. A sincere Protestant could never have written that book. The sinner is too unlike God to ever be used by God or set up as any kind of hero.

If you don't get forgiveness, you're missing the whole mystery. You are still living in a world of meritocracy, of quid-pro-quo thinking, a world of performance and behavior that earns an award. Forgiveness is the great thawing of all logic and reason and worthiness. It is a melting into the mystery of God as unearned love, unmerited grace, the humility and powerlessness of a Divine Lover. Forgiveness is the beginning, the middle and the end of the whole gospel, as far as I can see.

Without radical and rule-breaking forgiveness—received and given—there will be no reconstruction of anything. It alone breaks down our damnable world of trying to buy and sell grace. Grace is certainly the one gift that must always be free, perfectly free—to work. Without forgiveness there will be no future. We have hurt one another in too many historically documented and remembered ways. The only way out of the present justified hatreds of the world is grace.

## **What Is Behind Hate?**

Hate, though, which we looked at in Chapter Two, is unfortunately here to stay. Hate can be helpful to certain causes. It unites a group quickly, it gives a person identity even if it is a negative one, and most of all it takes away doubt and all free-floating anxiety. It gives us a place to stand that feels superior and in control. Hate settles the dust and ambiguity that none of us like. Hate is much more common, and more immediately effective than love. Hate, as we will sadly see below, makes the world go 'round.

You could say, in fact, that Jesus came to resolve the central and essential problem of hate. There is no other way to save us from ourselves, to save us from one another and therefore to "save us" unless we are saved from our need to hate. We have produced so much utopian talk about Jesus and love, but Jesus had a very hard time getting to the issue of love. First he had to expose and destroy the phenomenon of hate. Once he exposed the lie and illusion of hate, love could show itself clearly—and it did.

The pattern is still unfortunately the same. As Jesus shockingly put it, "Satan is the real prince of this world" (John 12:31). Hate, it seems,

is the ordinary, daily agenda. Love is the totally enlightened, entirely nonsensical way *out* of the ordinary agenda. The gospel presents the dilemma in a personal and cathartic narrative that grounds the whole issue in history and in one man's enlightened response to our history. One man, Jesus, accepts the religious and social judgment of hate and bears the consequences publicly, but in an utterly new way that transforms the pattern and the possibilities. For two thousand years, he has remained the most striking icon of a possible new agenda. His death exposed the lie and the problem like never before. His risen life tells people their lives could have a different story line. He did not just give us textbook answers from a distance, but personally walked through the process and said, "Follow me."

I believe that fear is almost always behind hate. Sometimes it looks like control, but even control freaks are usually afraid of losing something. It is almost always fear that justifies hatred, but a fear that is hardly ever recognized as such. "The angels of darkness must always disguise themselves as angels of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). The best and most convincing disguise for fear is virtue itself, or godliness. Then it never looks like fear.

For fear to survive, it must look like reason, prudence, common-sense, intelligence, the need for social order, morality, religion, obedience, justice or even spirituality. It always works. What better way to veil vengeance than to call it justice? What better way to cover greed than to call it responsible stewardship? Only people who have moved beyond ego and controlling of all outcomes, only those practiced at letting go, see fear for the impostor that it is. To be trapped inside of your small ego is always to be afraid.

To not have anyone that you can trust is necessarily to be a control freak. Thus great religion tries its best to free individuals from the tyranny of their small and fragile selves. It always points toward a larger identity that we call the Godself, the True Self, the self "hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3), the trustworthy Lover. Healthy and true religion, like Jesus himself, tells you that there is Someone you *can* trust. You do not have to create all the patterns, and you do not have to fix all the failures. What else would be the beginnings of peace?

If the small ego is not transformed, one other pattern is inevitable. The fear is too destabilizing and unsettling for the small self to bear alone, and it must either be denied or projected elsewhere. The process of both denying *and* projecting your fears and hatreds is called "scapegoating," discussed in Chapter Two, from the Jewish ritual of putting your faults on a goat that was whipped out into the desert (see Leviticus

16). The object of our wrath, like the poor “escaping goat,” is completely arbitrary and artificial. It has nothing to do with truth or reason. It has to do with fear. Then a plausible and much needed projection screen will always be found for our little drama.

The amazing thing is how well it works. We rather easily displace our fears onto other people, other issues, other places and other times. Anything seems better to us than bearing the burden of my-fear-here-now-myself. Only the Great Self can carry such anxiety, such ambiguity, such essential insecurity. It is much too much for the small self to carry.

So we are stuck with ever new brands of hate. Some have said that the best we have been able to do in the last forty years is to move hatred to ever higher forms of sophistication and ever more subtle forms of disguise. But we still love to hate: Feminists can hate men, liberals can hate conservatives, activists can hate rich people, good family values folks can hate homosexuals and victims can hate perpetrators. We just change the vocabulary to make it sound well thought out. This twice-distilled hate is now legitimate, necessary, deserved and very well disguised! Jesus would call it “driving out the devil by the prince of devils,” hating supposed evil and becoming hatred ourselves—but now even better hidden from ourselves and difficult to expose. Now we hate under the banner of God and goodness and political correctness. This is the prince of devils, for sure, a devil almost impossible to drive out.

Paul the Pharisee had to be thrown to the ground and the scales had to painfully fall from his eyes for him to recognize that in the name of his religion he had become hate, and even mass-murderer. The cock had to crow several times before the first pope, Peter, could recognize that he was doing the very thing he said he would *never* do. Yet these are the two figures that stand in front of the largest church in Christendom as the two pillars of the Roman Church. They were not saints by later, pious definitions, but instead they were transformed examples of hatred and fear. This is not the rare exception, this is the norm and pattern.

It seems there is something we know by losing and finding that we never would have known by simply being safe and sweet. The greatest lovers are not uncommonly the same people who once hated and feared. Virtue is not just will power, but actually vice overcome.

Both René Girard and Gil Bailie have taught us that the most effective and common way to turn social hatred into social harmony is via a scape-goat. It works so well, it gathers the community so quickly, that it has perdured through most of human history. Now it is the normal story line, so normal that we hardly see it. It remains denied, invisible and unaware.