

In the abundant grace in which we live, we are asked to be what has been gifted and received. We are to pay the abundance of God's blessings forward. Jesus's teaching in this Gospel passage is powerful and life-giving. Yet many struggle with forgiving – what it is and what it is not ... not because they, we, are bad people but because we are human. Made in God's image most certainly and most certainly human in thought, and deed. I am mindful this topic stirs painful memories and renders deep sadness. And if that is you – focus and hear the stirrings of God within and around you. Not due to my words but due to God's forgiving love.

I'm going to enter this blessing of forgiving with what it is not.

Forgiveness is not denial. Forgiveness is not pretending that an offense does not matter, or that a wound doesn't hurt, or that Christianity requires us to forget past harms and "let bygones be bygones." Forgiveness isn't acting as if things don't have to change, or assuming that because God is merciful, God isn't grieved and angered by injustice. Forgiveness begins in the acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Of harm. Of real and profound violation. We need to begin by recognising and naming the extent of the brokenness. And we need to because we were created for good. We were created for love, equality, tenderness, and wholeness. As image-bearers of God, we were made for a just and nurturing world that honours our dignity. When we experience any deviation from that basic goodness, it is appropriate - it is human and healthy *and Christian* – to react with horror.

A metaphor may assist ... forgiveness isn't an escalator; it's a spiral staircase. We circle, circle, and circle again, trying to create distance between the pain we've suffered and the new life we seek. Sometimes we can't tell if we've ascended at all; we keep seeing the same, broken landscape. Yet slowly our perspective changes. Slowly the ground of our pain falls away. Slowly we rise.

Forgiveness is not a detour or a shortcut. The scripture that calls us to forgive also calls us to mourn, to lament, to speak truth to power, and to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Forgiveness in the Christian tradition is not a palliative; it works hand-in-hand with the arduous work of repentance and transformation.

There is nothing godly about responding to systemic evil with passive acceptance or unexamined complicity. Jesus forgave. He also raged. He resisted all violations of sanctuary. He called out anyone who blocked access to his Father's house. He denounced the mistreatment of the most vulnerable and troubled people in his society. There is a time to get angry and stay angry. A time to insist on change. A time to say, "Enough is enough."

Forgiveness is not synonymous with healing or reconciliation. Healing has its own timetable, and sometimes reconciliation isn't possible. Sometimes our lives depend on us severing ties with our offenders, even after we've forgiven them. In this sense, forgiveness is not an end; it's a beginning. An orientation. A leaning into the future. Where it will lead is not pre-ordained.

Finally, forgiveness is not quick and easy. Not for us humans. Not when we are honest. Forgiveness is a process - a messy, non-linear, and often barbed process that can leave us feeling whole and liberated one minute, and bleeding the next.

In my experience, no one who glibly says the words "I forgive you" gets a pass from this messy process, and no one who struggles to forgive for reasons of temperament, circumstance, history, or trauma should feel that they're less spiritual than those who don't.

Of course, there are times when forgiveness happens dramatically and instantly. But most of the time, there is no cathartic, "altar call" moment when the hurts of the past simply slip off our backs and roll away. There is only the daily business of forgiveness as a slow, sustained way of life. A practice enacted one layered, complicated, and unsentimental moment at a time.

If forgiveness is not denial, or a shortcut, or a reconciliation, or an easy process, then what is it? What exactly is Jesus asking of us when he tells us to forgive each other again and again and again and again?

In her popular memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.

Forgiveness is a transformed way of seeing. A way of seeing that is forward-focused. Future-focused. Forgiveness is to be our regular practice, our way of life. We forgive because we are a forgiven people - a people generously and lavishly forgiven by God.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. said

"Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude."

Taking a forgiving approach does not mean that you become a passive doormat or a pitiful victim. Dr. King was anything but passive or pitiful. He was a champion. He was a warrior. And he was wronged over and over again. Yet he didn't let the wrongs get in the way of his work. He learned to write his hurts in the sand.

As the story demonstrates ... there were two friends walking through the desert. During some point in the journey, they had an argument, and one friend slapped the other one in the face. The one who got slapped was hurt, but without saying anything, he wrote in the sand,

"Today my best friend slapped me in the face."

They kept on walking, until they found an oasis, where they decided to take a bath. The one who had been slapped got stuck in the mire and started drowning, and his friend saved him. After he recovered from the near drowning, he wrote on a stone,

"Today my best friend saved my life."

The friend, who had slapped and saved his best friend, asked him,

"After I hurt you, you wrote in the sand, and now you write on a stone. Why?" The other friend replied, "When someone hurts us, we should write it down in sand, where the winds of forgiveness can erase it away.

But when someone does something good for us, we must engrave it in stone where no wind can erase it."

Wendy