

Chapter 5

Forgiveness

Introduction

In Chapter 4, I opened with referring to the culture in which I grew up as one where shame and blame were dynamics that ran throughout it. I will add here that shame and blame form a gateway if not outright residence in another pairing of dynamics, the fraternal twins of revenge and retaliation.

These four forces have been around since humanity began. In retrospect, I have realized that the area of the United States in which I was reared was and is one of the best case studies of how these have embedded themselves and continue to perpetuate beyond those regional borders. The area is known as Little Dixie, mainly because early settlers were from the Old Confederacy. And there you have it.

All the negative points one could raise about that attempt to keep slavery as an appropriate way to treat people came in. Even some of those of the “Five Civilized Tribes” who were moved by Andrew Jackson had slaves. A real paradox, particularly as all of the native Americans relocated to that then territory had experienced levels of genocide and trauma to their cultures that continues until now.

Of course, the Old Confederacy was emulating the cultures that had immigrated to the New World, driven by imperialistic colonialism. Losing the Civil War only sharpened their sense of keeping the “Lost Cause” alive, which included social mores that sometimes are labeled as Antebellum Rhetoric. These have some façade of gentility to them but quickly fade into the shame and blame and revenge-retaliation modes, especially if resisted.

Thus, a culture of deep resentment, anger, and a readiness to fight not only has emerged, but continues to find connection with others who find it easier to seek revenge and retaliate when opposed than otherwise.

The shame and blame and revenge-retaliation modes find easy targets in those the shamers/blamers, revengers/retaliators consider weaker. Since in this cultural movement women are supposed to be submissive to the men, especially white men, they feel emotional and physical abuse. Children, too. And, of course, anyone not of white complexion also are targets.

What becomes a cycle of violence in the culture, moving along from generation to generation, may be most easily seen as expressions of masculine toxicity. But there are also expressions from anyone, no matter the gender or ethnicity or age who operate with a sense of being in charge—the kiss up, kick down platitude becomes reality.

Little address was made of these dynamics in any of the congregational life of which I was a part, not only in my growing up, but even into my graduate education times. If the theological perspectives communicated to me held, implicitly in most cases, any sense of outreach, missions, taking the Gospel beyond our usual borders, there were the same imperialistic, colonizing facets as the rest of the culture.

I came to realize, as well, that these people who articulated revenge and retaliation were people who had hurts, trauma, injuries, which had affected their emotions, their sense of theology, and

especially how theology should be shaping behavior in more positive directions. Any discussion about forgiveness, for example, in my early church experiences was limited to this or that theory of atonement which moved off quickly into ethereal conceptualization that did no one any good. There was little, if any, definition. Also, hardly any direction toward understanding how one is forgiven. Further, ideas were not provided toward how to forgive one's self or others, especially parents, or any of those persons close to one who cast their trauma upon others.

Anger was not allowed to have public expression. Children were expected to suppress their anger, no outbursts anywhere, no talking back to parents, no resistance to unclear directions which carried penalties if not fulfilled. No wonder the cycle continues.

Back to those students who testified of growing up in a Christian home—there were those. And, there were those who had not grown up in anything that could be labeled Christian. Either way, those persons were unable to articulate forgiveness. The first group had glossed over anything they could finally come to recognize as ill treatment. The second group carried the anger more visibly. Both needed to understand matters of forgiveness.

My thought to all of them was, “You minister out of who you are. Until you can forgive especially your parents for what you consider real injustice, horrible treatment, bad information, you will be limited on how you can be the best minister you are called to be.” For some of them it was a breakthrough. Of course, for too many they were so disposed to carrying anger and thought they had the right to be revengeful and retaliatory to anyone that they went on and became the authoritarian pastors we all know about.

Forgiveness: a route to dealing with shame/blame, revenge/retaliation

The person said in class, “This is deep stuff.” I’d just finished leading the group in a discussion about forgiveness. I wondered why it was deep for the person, until I began to think through some of the ideas that just appeared in the Introduction. Here we were in graduate theological education, and the matter of forgiveness, which could otherwise be used in the place of lovingkindness, peace that passes understanding, grace, mercy, pity, apology, lenience, understanding, tolerance, and contentment was a thing of “deep stuff.” That kind of descriptor from that person revealed a lack of acquaintance, not just with the terms, but the experience of forgiveness. The terms, no doubt, had been used in that student’s congregational experience. No doubt, the word tolerance, though, had a more closed application than open one. Grace, like my growing up experience, was used often but never seemed to land.

Whatever Happened to Forgiveness?

Forgiveness, like other theological themes, accountability in the last chapter for instance or Holy Spirit in the chapter before it, has been bandied, and bantered, about for centuries. There is a certain inexplicability about that sentence, I have to say. On one hand, the theologians from the early centuries of the Church and on have talked about salvation, with one of the associated ideas in the concept of salvation being forgiveness.

Forgiveness became a tool of the Church, though, in the Middle Ages and on toward holding control over the populace. One would not be far off if thinking that the concept of hell, particularly as Dante Alighier described it, became a threat hung over the people requiring them to bring money to the officers of the Church along with confessions to gain absolution (forgiveness).

I do think the use of public confession, written into the liturgy, private confession to a priest in the confessional, has merit, unless it becomes another manipulative tool to control the congregants. And, there is where that mechanism went.

With the European Reformers, some of the idea of forgiveness, its facet, portion, interface with salvation, was recovered. As good ideas are often subject to dilution over a period and poor applicators, so has the dilution of forgiveness come to be a part of especially Western expressions of Christianity, and by association any others professing Christianity through the auspices of Western Christians.

The term, theme, idea, principle of forgiveness usually does not get explained. Sermonic examples of loan forgiveness are meant to suffice for congregants' understanding of forgiveness.

No connection was ever made to any synonyms of forgiveness that were also terms used in the Bible, like righteousness, loving kindness, mercy, and especially love. But, of course, that latter term, love, also failed to get any delineation into popular language, and especially what it meant actionally.

By the time that forgiveness came into my vocabulary and acquaintance in church life, this kind of "loan forgiveness" example was all I got. The proponents of these kinds of examples failed to realize they had made forgiveness into a transactional matter. That, along with "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Ephesians 2:8-9 was sonorously repeated most Sundays.

Any explanation of what those verses meant or how I could apply them never followed. Not until I read ". . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13) helped address the futility of trying to unpack the Ephesians verses make sense. Disjunctiveness ran throughout those sermons and Sunday School lessons as these bits and pieces of scripture, never put together, but distributed in a platitudinous way.

As well, a one size fits all approach was used, reflecting little realization that when Jesus offered forgiveness in the Gospels, there were different persons with different expressions of needing forgiveness. Forgiveness for what can be asked in a great many congregational gatherings. The response to the question, if ever raised and the tacit rule was never to raise it, was forgiveness of sin and to get a ticket to "eternal life and heaven."

Therein lie other non-defined terms. The definition of sin was narrowed to include essentially individual, personal actions like avoiding behavior that involved alcoholic drinks, smoking tobacco. Little to no attention was given to those systemic involvements like sexism, racism, economic practices that were oppressive for demographics close by and far away, anything to do with the environment—also close by or far away. As for eternal life and heaven, both those were ethereal, abstract, the afterlife which was usually described with words from the pulpit of "all are welcome" but the again-tacit rule was, unless you're like us, our kind of people, don't bother. It was a most exclusionary statement wrapped in what those people blindly considered inclusion.

With the male dominated pastoral positions, also there usually was a dismissal of emotions being expressed in faith conversation. Tears, for example, were looked down upon with a quick, "Boys and men don't cry. That's left to the women, you know how they're more emotional than men, anyway."

Along with the dilution of interpreting, and the collective, incoherent narrative, as well as little relational communication of forgiveness has come a rise in the culture, a more public expression, of the shame/blame, revenge/retaliation approach to life. Incivility reigns in too many sectors of the culture, including congregations. Frankly, it is easier to go with the feelings of the need to put down persons, use sarcasm, to retaliate than to establish more civil, peaceful, stable relationships. The practice of forgiveness, a healthy way of dealing with the injuries—whether physiological or psychological—requires a learning and relearning of, dare I say it, skills, exercises, pathways to understanding forgiveness toward others and toward ourselves.

Some Pathway Suggestions for Assimilating and Distributing Forgiveness

I have the feeling too many who represent the Church have let us down, living life with a very superficial understanding, if any attention at all is given to, forgiveness. Among those who reflect the toxic masculinity, narcissistic leadership style, they will be dismissive of the suggestions that follow. I have come to think, though, that with the decline from ecclesial centers in mentioning forgiveness, giving appropriate living examples, and dynamics people can absorb, as well as relate to others, we should turn to those in the helping professions, the therapists, the counselors, the psychologists, who recognize that more often than not persons need one to one attention on these kinds of things.

And, as there are different routes to forgiveness, so there are different modes of patterns, or pathways, for persons to exercise forgiveness. Desmond Tutu in his “The Book of Forgiving” was insightful in using Kubler-Ross’s stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) to juxtaposition with forgiveness. These dynamics, themes, energies, have been compartmentalized when they have a great deal in common.

Tutu’s point, just as there are stages to grief, so are there to forgiveness. As some deny there is any reason to grieve, the first Kubler-Ross stage, so do some people fail to identify the matters that have pained them, for which they need to initiate a process of forgiveness. Also, grief and forgiveness find common ground in being matters that cannot be hurried.

With the Kubler-Ross stages of grief, Tutu raised the necessary dynamic that too often gets forgotten, we are in the realm of emotional intelligence when talking about forgiveness. That concept has been victimized for too long by those who represent the Church, especially those groups who trace their origins back into the Reformation of Western Europe as an emphasis on a more logical-mathematical approach (one of Howard Gardner’s intelligences) to thinking, with an accompanying downplay of how people “feel” their way through theological concepts, decisions that always carry moral facets.

Contemporary science teaches us that emotions have even cellular points of initiation and response. But that concept will only make impact on those who “go with the science” in regard to our physiological and psychological health—which have interface.

Daniel Goleman stirred the intelligence pot when he dared publish his research in “Emotional Intelligence.” Certainly, one can criticize any research, especially if you have little background in psychology, physiology, or any of the professions that could be called coping, rehabilitation, healing professions.

Key components of emotional intelligence are that of being able to assess one’s own emotions, having a sense of management of those emotions, holding a sense of addressing where there are

points where one's emotions need to reflect a more socially aware state, as in empathy with others.

Perhaps Tutu's juxtaposition of Kubler-Ross's stage of anger illustrates best where emotions addressed is a necessary part of identifying the what, why, and how of forgiveness. Another way to say this is Tutu brought to the fore how the content of our minds too often is made the dominant facet rather than the process of our minds, our thinking, which is important for, I would say, especially theological concepts.

With emotional intelligence emphases, one more consideration for making one's path with and through forgiveness is to consider the enneagram mode. Though consisting of facets that have ancient origin, the enneagram gained popularity in the late 1990s and 2000s. Projecting nine different types of personalities, made up of differing traits, perceptions, and perspectives of virtues and passions, the tool has the advantage of crossing over between theological-ethical language, expressions of these virtues and passions in Scripture, and catch points in nearly every culture around the globe.

Using the enneagram approach can be as simple or complex as one wants. At the least it assists persons in identifying their own and others' personality traits, somewhat predictable responses of these traits to interaction with others, and, in the case of forgiveness, how one can muster the motivation, initiative, and follow through toward a more functional sense of forgiving one's self and others.

My own sense of a pathway for forgiveness to be a reality for me has some steps, stages, increments made up of pieces of what is known as the scientific method, a mixing in of some of the facets of Bloom's taxonomy, with as much sensitivity as I can include to my emotions. Of course, as Tutu understood about Kubler-Ross, I understand about my list that makes up a process, these ideas do not run necessarily always in the sequence I list them here.

These points have a way of falling back on each other, merging at the same time, moving forward two steps and fall back at least one. My intent is to delineate these with a little discussion with each, enough, I hope, to get you on the way to devising your own pathway/process toward understanding and implementing forgiveness more than you have previously.

Identification—What is that nagging feeling, sense of hurt and loss, grudge, resentment, anger that rushes into your consciousness? Has some association from a phone call, a text, a conversation, seeing something on a shopping tour that brings these things up which are uncomfortable at best? Is it some treatment, slight, rudeness, outright attack that really has never been thought through and your first thought is how you should respond in a retaliatory way to make the other person pay for the damage done to your sense of selfhood?

Description—Do you have anyone with whom you can relate these associations, your sense of anger, for instance, of needing some kind of rectification over those incidents where you have been treated unfairly? The describing has the benefit of being cathartic, ventilating the emotional buildup. Some of what can be ongoing damage, the stress loads we take on or which invade us, will take a toll if left undescribed, unrelated to someone else. The practice of journaling can fulfill some of this ventilating.

Analysis—The identification and description of experiences can blur pretty quickly with analysis, as that dynamic begins to dig beneath the first surfacing of the sense of injustice being

put upon us. Are there any dynamics not recognized before? Are there any possibilities of stepping into one's imagination on the side of the context from where the intruder to your psyche has come and have any empathy for that person, or persons, for instance?

Interpretation—Quite possibly the analysis will lead one to consider the humanity of the other(s), and most importantly begin to see the other as having acted unjustly but still is a fellow creature created in the image of God. Jesus' statement from the cross of "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing," can be a new perspective for most of us. Think about bullies you have known, perhaps suffered because of their behavior toward you. Many of them are angry, feel inferior to others, and as reductionist as it may sound really don't know any better. If you had come up the way they had, you might act the same way, is one resolution to the analysis-interpretation increment.

Application—Forgiveness of those who are deceased is a real thing. The substance of that thought is at the crux of the forgiveness process. In some ways, the benefits are more for the forgiver than the one being forgiven. One will not forget the injustices done to one, but we can keep engaging the process until we are transformed, that our memories are redeemed. Lewis Smedes suggested in his "Forgive and Forget" book to keep on forgiving—following Jesus' teaching to Peter about forgiving seven times seven, seven times seventy, however you might translate the statement—until you can wish the other well. Provide to them truly the theological idea of "blessing" which is another word for shalom—may you, all yours, throughout Creation be well.

The process leans into a mindfulness about others that does not require a "pound of flesh" as consequences for harm done. For there really is no way that anything can be done to repair the damage. Neither is a "pass" given as there are always consequences flowing in upon the context.

Conclusion: As you've read the paragraphs above you likely have had at least one of two responses. One, this forgiveness stuff is really easy. Let me disallow you of that assumption right away. I'm thinking that forgiveness practiced moves to the heart of what Paul meant by "work out your own salvation." So many of our rationalizations, enculturations—all saturated by the philosophical, theological, and ethical that have become embedded in us—will at the least have to be essentially recalibrated, almost starting over for some of us. One must, as well, notice that here accountability and forgiveness find touch points. Not only to choose where to start but how to carry through takes courage, the third member of this current triad, and the subject of chapter 6.

Two, as you've decided to take on the forgiveness ideal as a process, notice there will be things that float up indicating you need to articulate forgiveness for something(s) you've committed against, acted on, said, treated others that can best be resolved by seeking forgiveness for that person, those persons. You may learn about self-forgiveness in that exchange. Third, as the process of forgiveness can move beyond one to one, one on one, social/cultural progress will be made as the processes are engaged as a movement. Imagine a congregation known as one that is recognized as a group of forgivers.

For Further Discussion

1. Besides "forgiveness," what are other theological concepts for you that can be better understood by how your emotions can clarify them?

2. How have you been taught, enculturated, given ecclesial information about forgiveness that has enabled you to assimilate and extend forgiveness?
3. Do a Scripture search; begin with a concordance list of the terms forgiveness, forgive, love, loving kindness, mercy. Across the centuries of experiences and locations represented in the preparation of Scripture, do you find these terms to form a larger whole? Do the various appearances of the terms indicate they may be presented through the basic ethical theories (deontological, teleological, and relational)?
4. Could you develop a composite pathway from the illustrations in the chapter for yourself toward identifying forgiveness, recognizing the positive effects of being a forgiving person, as well as integrating forgiveness into your day by day living?
5. With forgiveness laid over the former triads of deontology, teleology, and relational theories and contractual, retributive, and distributive accountability, which points intersect with forgiveness?
6. Is the five step exercise in the last five paragraphs before the chapter's conclusion a viable one for you to implement? What would it look like for you?