

Forgiveness (Part Two)

“If you forgive others”

Reflection 52 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Forgiveness is the moral force field of the universe. Flourishing, sustainable life depends on it. Dr. Bernie Siegel in his book *Love, Medicine & Miracles* records the story of “Wild Bill,” a World War II death camp survivor. It’s one of my favorite stories. It’s told by a psychiatrist, George Ritchie, about the early days in the just liberated death camp and adapted here.ⁱ

“[Wild Bill] was one of the inmates of the concentration camp, but obviously he hadn’t been there long: His posture was erect, his eyes bright, his energy inexhaustible. Since he was fluent in many languages, he became a kind of unofficial camp translator. Though Wild Bill worked fifteen and sixteen hours a day, he show no signs of tiredness. I was astonished to learn that he’d been in the camp since 1939! For six years he had lived on the same starvation diet, slept in the same disease-ridden barracks as everyone else, but without the least physical or mental deterioration. Wild Bill was our greatest asset, always counseling forgiveness. I commented to him one day, ‘It’s not easy for some of them to forgive. So many of them have lost members of their families.’”

He began slowly, ‘We lived in the Jewish section of Warsaw, my wife, our two daughters, and our three little boys. When the Germans reached our street they lined everyone against a wall and opened up with machine guns. I begged to be allowed to die with my family, but because I spoke German they put me in a work group. I had to decide right then whether to let myself hate the soldiers who had done this. Hate had just killed the six people who mattered most to me in the world. I decided then that I would spend the rest of my life – whether it was a few days or many years – loving every person I came in contact with.’ This was the power that had kept this man alive and well these many years.”

The untapped force field of the universe is always forgiveness. The business of disciples of Christ does not begin and end with baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism is the start of forgiveness as a way of life. It’s what we do. It’s who we’re becoming. It’s the way to a new world in the morning. It’s Jesus telling us to turn the other cheek and go the second mile, warning us that if we do not forgive those who sin against us our Father cannot forgive us.

The business of a disciple of Jesus is forgiveness. It’s what Paul said in Romans 12:14-21. Bless those who persecute you. Live in harmony. Do not repay evil for evil. Do not take revenge. If your enemy is hungry, feed him; heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. It’s the way the Gospel of Luke ends (24:47), “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in Jesus’ name to all nations beginning in Jerusalem.” And it’s what Jesus said that Resurrection evening, that first evening of our new world (as recorded in John 20:23): “To you I entrust the message and life of forgiveness. I want you to go out, among the people, and start forgiving them in my name. Tell them that there’s nothing they’ve ever done or ever thought that cannot

be forgiven. Tell them that they can come clean. God can be trusted. He will forgive you. And you can start over.”

No one would ever say that forgiveness is easy. It’s the hardest work you’ll ever do. It’s filled with complexity and ambiguity. I can forgive, for instance, but I cannot insist that you forgive. I can only say to the true victims in life (and there are many): I cannot insist that you forgive. You have been truly wronged. I cannot even insist that you must want to forgive, not in your pain. It would be indecently insensitive of me to add to your already heavy load by making you feel guilty for a response that is so initially human, natural, even appropriate. But I can ask you gently, quietly, to want to want to forgive. A disciple of Jesus can do nothing less.

There is much that I do not understand about forgiveness. By forgiving aren’t I just encouraging irresponsibility? Aren’t I empowering the wrongdoer? I don’t know. But I do know God was faced with this very same dilemma, and what was his solution? The Cross. The costliest sacrifice of himself. And maybe when instinct and common wisdom tells me not to forgive, then I must forgive more, and forgive in the most tangible, visible, and memorable way I can think of, at whatever cost to myself.

Another question – must a person be penitent before being forgiven? Don’t they have to at least apologize? Maybe grovel a little? Perhaps. Sometimes. But maybe the true question is: How can they repent unless someone forgives them? What is more likely to lead you to penitence? Isn’t it someone spontaneously and freely offering you forgiveness at great cost to themselves? What changes you?

So I listen to myself when I will not forgive. I have been wronged, sinned against. Months pass, maybe years. I am still angry. My voice rises in pitch and trembles. My stomach catches in my throat. My pulse races. I trip over my words. My soul darkens. And the wrong looms up, swells in size, and comes to fill my whole horizon. I am holding it so close to my eyes that it’s all I can see. And the person who did this to me was just this fragile, frightened, flawed person just like me. And I let it fill my universe. Poor blinded me. I am a person who not only needs forgiveness, but I am a person who needs to learn to forgive.

It comes down to a choice, two “laws” by which to live. There are two laws by which good people live: the Law of Fairness and the Law of Forgiveness. And we choose one or the other. We were brought up to be fair and expect fairness, but life doesn’t work that way. Teachers are often unfair. Coaches scream at you. Friends let you down. Bosses look out for themselves. Promises are made and broken. Life is not always fair. We can get angry and cynical and begin looking out for No. 1. Or we can build protective shells around ourselves and never trust again.

Jesus says, There is another way – the way of forgiveness. You write things off. You cancel the debt, and you feel a lot better. You just let the anger go. People do dumb, selfish and thoughtless things, often because they are suffering and do not see clearly. You decide to let things go. You forgive those who sin against you, because nothing else

works. Life lived any other way is too brittle. You can insist that life be worked out by the Law of Fairness, but one day you will crack. Or you can – in the spirit of our Teacher – begin to create a new world by the power of forgiveness.

But we, all of us, everyone everywhere, are being called to this way of forgiveness. It's the only way to a new world in the morning. There is no other way. There must be on earth a group of people bonded together, living, teaching, practicing, proclaiming, and learning the ways of forgiveness and teaching them to others. It's the message of Christian baptism. In Acts 2:38 Peter tells those whose hands are still wet with the Messiah's blood, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Whoever you are, whatever you've done, you can be forgiven. And you can forgive. We have our model: Jesus, interrogated all night long, stripped and scourged, mocked and spit upon, nailed, hanging in excruciating pain, gasping for every breath, hearing the taunting. And what is his dying prayer through it all? "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

It's his memo to himself. But it established two things for sure. You can be forgiven. And you must also forgive. And in the end, they are the same thing and the only way to a new world in the morning.

– Dale Pauls

ⁱ Pp. 194-195