

Joy and Forgiveness

Who is on your list of people you don't want to forgive, or struggle to forgive, or would never admit that you don't want to or struggle to forgive? In the human experience, I think it is nearly impossible to avoid the issue of forgiveness. For many, the idea is stupid – why forgive anybody for the wrongs they have done to you? It sure makes a lot more sense to pay them back for the harm they have caused you, often with interest.

Jesus ruined that idea for us, however, because he taught that forgiveness is central to following him. When asked how many times a person should forgive another person, his answer startled and probably disappointed: 70 X 70. In essence, he was saying forgiveness is limitless. What a buzz kill! Can we just forget he ever said that and follow him on the stuff we like?

Who is on your list? Sometimes it's people who will never know our names: egomaniacal politicians we can't stand, historical figures like Hitler, undefined havoc-wreaking people like drug dealers, rapists, dictators, phone scammers, greedy executives, and Dodgers fans. Sometimes we use these folk to wonder about the veracity and necessity of forgiveness, which sometimes takes away any compelling reason to pursue it. *If Hitler shouldn't deserve forgiveness, then neither should my neighbor who lets his dog use my lawn as a dump station.*

Sometimes the people on our list are very close to us. Relatives – parents, step-parents, siblings, step-siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, our own children – who hurt us in some way. Sometimes our partners with whom we shared vows to love, honor, and cherish are the ones who top our list. Sometimes teachers, or bosses, or coworkers make the list.

Sometimes the people on our list were largely unaware of the pain they were causing because they never wondered if they were causing harm and never asked. Sometimes the people on our list were very intentional with their harm. Sometimes we are so intertwined with the person that caused us pain that it's hard to recognize the nuances of the pain because we were complicit in the problem, making it complex, difficult to untangle, and messy.

Who is on your list?

The story of Joseph in the last 20+ chapters of Genesis have characters who had to navigate the challenging path of forgiveness. Joseph obviously had a lot to sort out regarding his brothers who were responsible for him being sold into slavery in Egypt, but also Potiphar's wife for accusing him of attempted rape, Potiphar for believing it, and the cupbearer who forgot about him for what must have felt like an eternity in prison. His brothers had a lot to sort out, first with their annoying younger brother Joseph and the flaunting of favoritism, but much more their father who was so insensitive to them based on their mothers. The Patriarch, Jacob, would eventually have forgiveness issues with his ten sons who sold Joseph into slavery and had him believe Joseph to be dead. We don't know if Jacob ever owned his failure as a father. If he

did, then he would have some self-forgiveness to work out. Joseph may have felt the need to seek forgiveness and forgive himself for the trauma he put his brothers through early in life and also later.

On the face of it, the Joseph story gives an elaborate reason why the Jewish people ended up in Israel, needing to eventually be saved by God through the exodus story with Moses' leadership. The nature of the book of Genesis itself, however, reminds us that it was written for more than establishing timelines, family trees, and migration plot points. Genesis is filled with stories. Stories are meant to be shared, savored, and discussed around dinner tables, campfires, by shepherds shepherding, bakers baking, seamstresses sewing, and rabbis rabbi'ing (not sure that's a thing, but you get me). Without a doubt, this story has been referenced for millennia regarding God's activity when things are tough, but also relating to relational dynamics that are painful.

The forgiveness in the Joseph story is more implied than not, represented by the remorse of the brothers and the assurance of welcome by Joseph. Sometimes we might not hear or offer words of forgiveness, yet our actions and attitudes will communicate it just the same:

Joseph threw his arms around his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his shoulder. He kissed all of his brothers and wept, embracing them. After that, his brothers were finally able to talk to him... "You planned something bad for me, but God produced something good from it, in order to save the lives of many people, just as he's doing today." – Genesis 45:14-15; 50:20 CEB

Of course, sometimes we use forgiveness as a tool of manipulation when we announce to someone that we have forgiven them as a means to let them know they had done something meriting forgiveness! Fun!

Sometimes we spin out on the subject of forgiveness at the start with lots of "yeah, but..." questions signaling our skepticism and reluctance to engage. We come up with a list of reasons why forgiveness is a bad idea. The Dalai Lama, touching on one such objection, noted that "forgiveness does not mean we forget. You should remember the negative thing, but because there is a possibility to develop hatred, we mustn't allow ourselves to be led in that direction—we choose forgiveness" (233). Archbishop Desmond Tutu was also clear about this: "Forgiveness does not mean you forget what someone has done, contrary to the saying 'Forgive and forget.' Not reacting with negativity, or giving in to the negative emotions, does not mean you do not respond to the acts or that you allow yourself to be harmed again. Forgiveness does not mean that you do not seek justice or that the perpetrator is not punished" (233).

For those who wonder why forgiveness is a worthy pursuit, Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminds us that "forgiveness is the only way to heal ourselves and to be free from the past." As he and Mpho explained in *The Book of Forgiving*, "Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound to the chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness, that

person will be our jailor. When we forgive, we take back control of our own fate and our feelings. We become our own liberator” (234-235).

Open and Relational Theologian Sheri Kling offered this insight recently: “One of the best definitions I’ve ever heard is that forgiveness is when we cease being the object of someone else’s story and become the subject of our own. A relational view might suggest that we are always part of each other’s story, but also that we can be creatively transformed out of our woundedness if we allow ourselves to be open to the fresh healing possibilities available in every moment.” Read that a few more times, please!

There are good arguments for why we should forgive – we perpetuate our own suffering when we remain in a state of unforgiveness. Yet it is really hard to do, isn’t it? Holding onto unforgiveness can be quite cathartic, right? We can feel a little better about ourselves when we can recognize and articulate the awfulness of the person who harmed us. In effect, however, that means we are “othering” the person who hurt us, which is an act of dehumanization long used to support and perpetuate the mistreatment of others. We may not want to admit it, but we may find ourselves using the same tactics that have been employed in the past, allowing for the suffering of millions of slaves, women and LGBTQ persons. Ouch!

The Dalai Lama cautions us: “This is where the power of forgiveness lies—not losing sight of the humanity of the person while responding to the wrong with clarity and firmness. We stand firm against the wrong not only to protect those who are being harmed but also to protect the person who is harming others, because eventually they, too, will suffer. So it’s out of a sense of concern for their own long-term well-being that we stop their wrongdoing. This is exactly what we are doing. We do not let anger and negative feelings develop toward the Chinese hard-liners, but in the mean time we strongly oppose their actions” (234-235).

He continues: “We can also realize that obviously nobody was born to be cruel, to harm us, but because of certain circumstances, now he or she dislikes me, so hits me. Perhaps my behavior, or attitude, or even my facial expression contributed to this person becoming my enemy. So I was also involved. Who is to blame? So sitting and thinking of the different causes and conditions, then you see that if we are really angry we must be angry toward the causes and conditions—ultimately their anger, their ignorance, their short-sightedness, their narrow-mindedness. So that brings a sense of concern, and we can feel sorry for these people” (235).

Note! None of this means victims are responsible for the abuse or injustice done to them. Understanding causes is not the same as excusing harm.

The above insights do offer help, don’t they? Richard Rohr talks about living unconscious versus with consciousness. We live unconscious when we are unaware of all the forces past and present that motivate our attitudes and behavior. We are basically on auto-pilot. Living consciously means we are aware of the forces and choosing to live freely, not necessarily based on what has shaped us. He goes so far as to say that when we are unconscious, we are living life out of our minds. That helps. I know when I have caused harm, I was largely out of my mind, so

to speak. Since we are all born in innocence, perhaps we should simply realize that people who have harmed us were obviously out of their minds when they hurt us, just like we have been. It feels different than othering to me. It feels unifying and humbling to me, and encourages me to have softer eyes toward those who hurt me.

Forgiving honors everyone's humanity – our own and everyone else's. This requires humility and sobriety. Last week we learned that acceptance is an important aspect of joy because it keeps us honest about what is. Not condoning it, but acknowledging it. This week, we are learning that forgiveness offers freedom from the pain that has been caused and the pain that unforgiveness continues to cause.

Not easy work! This requires courage and great strength. Archbishop Desmond Tutu noted that “those who say forgiving is a sign of weakness haven't tried it” (235). It turns out that we human beings aren't the only creatures who desire and pursue forgiveness:

Primatologist Frans de Waal believes that such peace-making activities are extremely common in the animal kingdom. Chimps kiss and make up, and it seems that many other species do as well. Not only apes like us but also sheep, goats, hyenas, and dolphins. Of the species that have been studied, only domestic cats have failed to show behavior that reconciles relationships after conflict. (This finding will not surprise anyone who has cats.) (236).

“If we choose to retaliate, or pay back, the cycle of revenge and harm continues endlessly,” noted the Archbishop, “but if we choose to forgive, we break the cycle and we can heal, renewing or releasing the relationship.” That healing and renewing is deeply tied to the vision of shalom that guided Judaism and Jesus. Forgiveness is a shalom thing. Shalom is all about healing and restoring, making us whole and well. Shalom is at the heart of who God is and what God is guiding in the world. The more shalom we allow, the greater joy we find in our lives. Not happy all the time, not always a feeling, but a realization that joy-killers and joy-thieves are not as pronounced as they once may have been.

To summarize: To forgive is not to excuse. It is not to forget. It is not to pretend the wound never mattered. Forgiveness is choosing not to let pain have the final word. It is a shalom thing. And maybe joy begins there.

Who is on your list? How has what we have looked at in Joseph's story and the insights from two great spiritual leaders informed and affected you today? Is today the day you will wish them shalom? Blessing? Lovingkindness? To wish these things is to hope for more God in their lives, not less. And it is wishing the same for yourself.

Maybe this song will help you get there: [*May You Be Well*](#) (by Michael Gungor)

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from the book, [*The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*](#), Kindle Edition.