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Forgiveness—The Way of Grace

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Introduction

The proper place to begin a reflection on forgiveness is with experience both in giving and receiving. What follows is a moving and deeply insightful account of both by Liselotte Terrell, a native of Sweden now an active United Methodist laywoman living in Hendersonville, Tennessee.

One Saturday afternoon several years ago as I was sitting at my kitchen table reading the daily lesson for my Disciple I study, a strange and unusual feeling came over me. The room became brighter and I was filled with warmth and comfort from deep within my soul. Though I can't say that I actually heard a voice, I nevertheless very clearly heard the words: “You must forgive.” I knew exactly what those words meant. Not only did I have to forgive my father for the intense emotional pain he had caused me in my teenage years, I also had to forgive myself. A pain that had caused me so much anger and bitterness, it actually had become part of who I was, something that had influenced and colored everything about me. Up until that point I looked at life in general and me in particular through the distorted lens of my father's view of me. But, even more importantly, I had to forgive myself for making so many wrong decisions based on that skewed view of self and my perceived lack of self worth.

It was very difficult and painful to let go of something that I had held onto so very tightly for way too long. It would have been so much easier if my father had asked for my forgiveness and acknowledged his wrong doing. In this idealized setting, of course, he would have been lying at my feet begging me to grant him absolution from his sins. Reality, however, tends to be somewhat different than what I conjure up in my fertile imagination. As of today, he has not acknowledged any wrong doing on his part, and I had to accept this within my soul, and only with the guidance of the Holy Spirit have I been able to move beyond my need to have him accept responsibility. I did forgive him, and thus I was able to let go of what had held me hostage and identified me for most of my adult life.

It didn't happen overnight, and even now the demons of anger and blame occasionally still rear their ugly heads. What did occur, however, was an emptying out from my soul of this black blob whose weight and impact on my soul I had not realized until it was gone. The anger was gone as was the guilt for not being able to love him as a daughter is supposed to love her father. I could now think of my father without getting all tied up in knots. Actually, truth be told, I did not feel anything when I thought of him other than pity for the person that he was, and I wondered what kind of wounds within his soul had caused him to lash out so cruelly at his oldest daughter.

It was quite strange to have that feeling of having a weight lifted when for so many years so much of my energies had been focused on either proving him wrong or, absurdly enough, proving him right, in his assessment of me. The space that was now empty in my soul was now ready to be filled again, but this time I knew that only God could lay claim to what had belonged to God from the very beginning. I can assure you, however, it was not easy, even though it may sound that way. It was the most difficult thing I have ever done, and it was really beyond my human abilities to do so alone. Only with the grace of God was I able to go beyond my human woundedness and tendencies to seek revenge and to extend the healing gesture of forgiveness, even though this gesture was neither asked for nor accepted. God, and only God, enabled me and gave me the strength to accomplish what I would have thought impossible. My one contribution was that I listened, and through my listening I not only

started a long overdue healing process, but I made room in my life for God.

Relatively speaking, forgiving my father was easy by comparison with forgiving myself. For so long I had lived under the assumption that everything in life had a direct cause and effect. All the hardship or sorrow that I endured was due to sins that I had committed earlier in my life--that I deserved everything, and more, that was coming to me. The God I then knew was keeping a very detailed tally of everything in my sin column and what sufferings I would have to endure before the slate would be wiped clean. In my mind I was convinced that my slate was never going to be wiped clean, no matter what. My sins were even beyond the forgiveness of my loving Almighty Father in heaven. How presumptuous and sinful that is! To think that anyone of us is beyond the forgiveness, redemption, and love of our God! It was a most humbling experience for me to realize that I was worthy in the eyes of God. In God's eyes I was indeed a beloved daughter who would always be welcomed home with open arms regardless of how many foreign countries of sin I had visited. No matter how imperfect I appear to my own eyes and to the eyes of the world, in God's eyes there is only love and acceptance.

The act of forgiveness was and is the cornerstone of my faith. Not only the act of extending forgiveness, but, even more importantly, the act of accepting it for myself has enabled me to start on my spiritual journey in earnest. How much misery do we humans endure due to lack of forgiveness, of ourselves and of others? How often do we try to silence the voice of God imploring us to let go of what we are holding onto? The world's message to us, to me, is that it is all about me and that I am entitled to hurt those who hurt me or mine and never to turn the other cheek. What arrogance it is for anyone of us to think, "My particular sin is so bad that I am beyond the reach of God"! Isn't that the ultimate sin--to limit God's abilities to forgiving only the sins of others; to think that my sins are greater than the power of the one and only Almighty? How can we love our neighbors if we cannot forgive them? How can we love ourselves without accepting forgiveness for ourselves? Guilt and blame are so prevalent that love and forgiveness are all but forgotten.

Extending forgiveness can appear to be so much easier than accepting it. There is an inherent sin and danger in extending

forgiveness on a superficial level. It can then have an air of superiority attached to it if it is not authentic: “Since I am so much better as a person than you are, I will forgive you even though you do not deserve it.” To truly forgive someone requires letting go and acknowledging the frailty and the humanity of the other person. It requires, too, an acknowledgement that I am just as much in need of forgiveness as the person I am forgiving. Accepting forgiveness lays me open with all of my shortcomings as I have to acknowledge that I have done someone wrong, especially when that someone was deserving of whatever I had done. All acts of forgiveness, either extended or accepted, require vulnerability and humility on our part. It is through this vulnerability and humility that God works God’s miracles in our souls. I do believe that through each and every act of forgiveness we take one small step toward sanctification.

A. Forgiveness the Cornerstone of Faith

Just as this beautiful testimony makes clear, forgiveness is “the cornerstone of faith.” John the Baptist called for “repentance for forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). As the Lord’s Supper reminds us each time we take the bread and the cup, Jesus “poured out his life for forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28). After the resurrection Jesus instructed the disciples “to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins to all nations in his name” (Luke 24:47). The apostolic preaching ended with an appeal to hearers to be “baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Peter declared to the Jewish Sanhedrin trying to stifle the apostles’ preaching that God had raised Jesus up as prince and savior “to give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel” (5: 31). After a dream widened his understanding to embrace God’s impartiality the one-time fisherman judged that all the prophets attested that “every person believing in him would receive forgiveness through his name” (10:43). The erstwhile persecutor Saul now become Apostle to the Gentiles Paul, likewise, declared that forgiveness of sins was proclaimed to Gentiles through Jesus, setting them free from all sins for which the Law of Moses could not acquit them (13:38-39). Paul explained to King Herod Agrippa that the Christ had sent him “to open the eyes of the Gentiles, to turn them from darkness to light and the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among the saints” through faith in Christ (26:18).

When we pray, we Christians include a petition for forgiveness of sins in recognition that, as long as we live, we sin. We will have to explore more how sin makes forgiveness a “must,” but at this point we must notice the hook Jesus attached to our petition. We don’t simply pray, “Forgive us our debts, sins, or trespasses,” but “Forgive us as we have forgiven!” Notice here that Matthew and Luke recorded the prayer differently. Whereas in Luke 11:4 the petition is, “Forgive us our sins, for we have ourselves forgiven everyone who owed us,” Matthew makes it conditional, “Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors” (6:12).¹ He added the explanation that if you forgive others’ transgressions, God will forgive yours; but if you don’t forgive, God will not forgive you your transgressions (6:14-15). In Matthew’s portrait Jesus has a powerful interest in the connection between forgiving and being forgiven. “If you are approaching the altar to make an offering and remember that your brother has something against you, put your gift down before the altar and go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt 5:24). There is no parallel in Mark or Luke. To Peter’s question, “How many times will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Seven times?” Jesus replied, “Not seven but seventy times seven!” (18:21-22). To illustrate, Matthew added the parable of the merciless servant whose master showed compassion by forgiving his debt but who refused to remit even a small amount to a fellow servant. When the master found out, he exacted vengeance, putting the penurious wretch to the torturers until he should pay everything he owed. Jesus added, “So will my heavenly Father do to you, if you do not forgive your brother [or sister] from your hearts” (18:35).²

God expects unlimited forgiveness, but does God extend forgiveness without limit. The Evangelists do mention one “unforgiveable sin,” whose identity has intrigued Christians through the centuries. Mark (3:28-29) and Luke (12:10) placed the saying in the context of Jesus’ challenges to discipleship, where it is difficult to interpret. Matthew, however, connected it closely with the Pharisees’ charge that Jesus did not cast out demons “except in Beelzebub, the

¹ The *Didache* and the more ancient manuscripts favor *opheilemata*, “debts,” and *opheilatais* rather than *paraptomata*, “transgressions” or the familiar “trespasses.”

² The parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) may imply something of the concern for forgiveness, but the main point is care of the poor.

prince of demons” (Matt 12:24). After arguing that, if he did so, Satan would be working against himself, Jesus gave the harsh rejoinder that “every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come” (12:31-32). In attributing to Satan works which the Holy Spirit did through Jesus, the Pharisees came close to the unforgiveable. They ascribed to Satan the works of God. Could there be a greater act of non-belief and denial?

B. Forgiveness a “Must” for Incurable Sinners

In biblical perspective I think we will recognize that we humans are confronted with the necessity of making forgiveness a way of being and acting because we have an incurable disease called sin. The malady is universal. It was customary in Judaism to think of Gentiles as sinners and to see Jews in sharp contrast. But John the Baptist came forth, perhaps from the Qumran community, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). He addressed Jews. Jesus himself received baptism at John’s hand (1:9), setting up a little problem because Christians believed him “without sin.” Although his proclamation differed from John’s as he announced that the Kingdom of God had drawn near, he too called for repentance (1:15) and directed his compassionate ministry to the outcasts and sinners of Jewish society, earning himself the dubious title “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). Responding to carping of critics that he ate with sinners and tax collectors, he insisted that his mission was “to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mark 2:17=Matt 9:13; Luke 5:32). Not the healthy but the sick needed a doctor (Matt 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31).

The Synoptic Gospels depict Jesus as a prodigal forgiver of sins, a role of authority which he used his healing ministry to confirm. All three preserve the dramatic story of the healing of a paralytic in Capernaum very early in Jesus’ ministry. It’s a dramatic story of faith. Four friends carried their paralyzed friend on a litter to where Jesus was speaking in a house. Because of the crowd, they couldn’t get inside, so they toted their friend up onto the roof, ripped up some tiles, and let him down in front of Jesus. In this instance Jesus startled those present by saying, “Your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5=Matt

9:2; Luke 5:20). We should be careful here not to deduce from this that Jesus saw all sickness as a necessary consequence of sin. Sometimes illness does have its source in sin, but that is not the point here. To the contrary, the paralytic's plight furnished an opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate God's mysterious presence and power, the Kingdom, in and through his ministry. To the unvoiced skepticism of the holiness people, he replied with "proof" of the Son of man's authority to forgive sins on earth, namely, in healing.

Jesus had to defend this mission against the attacks of leaders of a Jewish holiness movement, the scribes and Pharisees. He used parables. Luke, who had a special concern to show how Jesus' mission to the outcasts and rejects of Jewish society opened the way to Gentiles, placed a row of these parables at the center of his portrait of Jesus. As Pharisees and scribes started murmuring about Jesus gathering and eating with sinners (Luke 15:1-2), he told parables of the lost sheep (15:3-7; Matt 18:12-14), the lost coin (15:8-10), and the loving father (15:11-32). Luke alone preserved the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:10-14) as Jesus' answer to "those confident that they are righteous and despise everybody else" (18:9). The bottom line: the humble tax collector was okayed by God "because everybody who exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (18:14).

The evangelists, especially Luke again, have saved stories which confirm Jesus' ministry to sinners. Two stories from Luke show his special interest in establishing the point. At a dinner hosted by a Pharisee named Simon (Luke 7:36-50) a woman identified as "a sinner" stood near Jesus and wept, letting tears dribble on his feet, wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and then anointed them with myrrh. Simon grumbled to himself, "If he were a prophet, he would have known what sort of woman it was who touched him, that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). Sensing Simon's unspoken critique, Jesus replied with a parable of two debtors, one who owed a little and one who owed a lot. If both were forgiven, who would love more? Simon gave the right answer, but Jesus proceeded to compare the woman's prodigal display of love with Simon's stingy hosting. He then turned to the woman to say, "Your sins are forgiven" (7:48), salting the wounds of the Pharisees' concern for holiness above everything else. Notice, please, how this differs from the anointing at

Bethany recorded in Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, and John 12:1-8, where the focus is on wasting precious ointment.

The Zacchaeus story (Luke 19:1-10) vividly underscores that “the Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost” (19:10). No one in Jewish society of Jesus’ day could have fallen lower or been scummier in the eyes of the devout than a *chief* tax collector who had gotten *rich* collecting money for the hated Roman occupiers. Being very short, he made a spectacle of himself by scrambling up a sycamore tree and perching on a limb so as to see the popular rabbi and prophet as he passed by surrounded by a crowd. Zacchaeus surely expected Jesus to look any way but up when he came to the tree. When Jesus not only stared him straight in the eye but said, “Zacchaeus, hurry and get down from there, for I have to stay at your house today!” (19:5), old Zach must almost have fallen out of that tree. “Luke says, ‘He received him rejoicing’” (19:6). Can you imagine what that meant to a person so ostracized and demonized by his neighbors? Immediately, Zacchaeus tried to put the best face on himself and what he did. “See, sir, I give half of all my possessions to the poor, and if I have defrauded anybody, I repay fourfold” (19:8). What is revealing, though, is Jesus’ reply. “Today salvation has come to this house, for he too is a child of Abraham” (19:9). You would err to think that Jesus based this confirmation on Zacchaeus’ little apology. As the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector shows, tax collectors could count on only one thing--the infinite, unconditional love of God. We should be thankful that the wideness of God’s mercy far surpasses the measure of our minds.

The Gospel according to John makes forgiveness of sins the central purpose of the the Word become flesh (John 1:14). The day after his baptism of Jesus, according to this Gospel, John the Baptist signals his perception of Jesus’ mission: “Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The story of the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 7:53-8:11) is almost certainly a later insertion, but it, too, attests Jesus’ representation of God as a God of unlimited compassion for sinners. Notice that the man involved seems to have gotten away scot free, but the woman was headed for certain death by stoning. Jesus’ challenge to such a miscarriage of justice, “Let anybody here who is sinless throw the first stone” (John 8:7). Not a stone flew.

Forgiveness of sins in Jesus' compassion movement gained a stout advocate when a zealot of the holiness movement, Saul of Tarsus, experienced conversion on his way to Damascus to put an end to the despised sect. Although the convert Paul preferred the more juridical language of "justification" rather than "forgiveness," he strove mightily to establish that all, meaning both Jews and Gentiles, "have sinned and fall short of God's glory" (Rom 3:23) and that all stand in need of the forgiveness of God which we have received through Jesus Christ. Why? Because all have sinned in the same way the first human did and through sin death entered the world (Rom 5:12). But we need not despair, for God has provided a remedy through the Second Adam. Where sin abounded, now grace has superabounded. How do we know that? Through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus God has shown that God is on our side. "Who will lay any charge that will stick against God's own. God is the one who okays us? Who will be the condemner. Christ is the one who died, who is at God's right hand, who indeed intercedes for us. What, then, will separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom 8:33-35).

C. Forgiveness a "Must" for a Community of the Flawed

Forgiveness of sins, I think we can conclude, always stands very near the center of Christian life. The question which we now need to address is how critical forgiveness is to the forming of community composed of flawed human beings. In Colossians 3:1-17 the Apostle Paul reflects on the transformation which must occur for the New Humanity to emerge from the Old. Converts to Christianity, as it were, must "put off" old habits and "put on" new ones suitable to this new life in Christ. The *old* which we want to "put to death" have to do with self-centered sins of sex ("fornication, uncleanness, lust, evil desire"), possessions ("covetousness, which is idolatry"), feelings ("anger, hot-headedness, malice, hurtful speech, shameful speech"), and lying (Col 3:5-8). The *new*, which will indicate restoration of the image of God in us as God's own, consist above all of *agape*-love from which will spring compassion and kindness, humility and kindness, and patience, forbearance and forgiveness (3:12-13). *Forbearance* and *forgiveness* are qualities needed if members lack the other virtues. Even "in Christ" our "old humanity" still exerts its influence, so that, when all else fails in our effort to be the community God purposed for humankind, "if anyone has some complaint against

another person,” we must learn to “put up with one another and forgive one another, just as the Lord has forgiven you” (3:13).

In every era Christians have had to confront the question of how to practice forgiveness in communities composed of imperfect mortals, for a community depends on balancing holiness and forgiveness. Jesus himself weighted decisions on the side of compassion, but churches must also consider the demands of discipleship. It is very easy to lapse into what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace,” excusing members for any offense. We, therefore, might have some sympathy for those early Christians who took a rigorous approach, as the Novatianists in the third century did, refusing to readmit persons who failed to live up to their baptismal vows when faced with prison, torture, or even death. The Novatianists argued, “God can forgive all sins, but we cannot.” So they refused to forgive the lapsed and take them back into communion. Over against their rigid and puritanical stance Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, who had himself gone into hiding during the persecution under Decius (249-251), insisted on looking at individual cases of human failing in times of persecution. He distinguished between those who hastened to offer the sacrifices required by the authorities and persons who avoided offering them by obtaining certificates that they had done so. He preferred to err on the side of compassion rather than on the side of holiness.

If Jesus himself led a compassion movement which stood against the rabbinical holiness movement, I think Christians should side with Cyprian and the early Catholic Church when it comes to forgiving and reconciling sinners. Augustine, one of Christianity’s greatest theologians, fingered the chief issue. The Church is and always will be a *corpus permixtum*, a mixed body of saints and sinners. We will err to expect perfection in this age. The Church is wiser, therefore, to make a mistake on the side of grace, God’s gift of forgiveness, than on the side of perfection. The Living Christ is the source of Christian community. Christ incorporates into his Body believers at many different stages in their pilgrimage, but all are sinners wholly dependent on the grace of God. What communities should seek is to create an open, accepting, and non-judgmental environment in which sinners saved by grace can speak openly about their struggle to be faithful knowing that they will receive forgiveness.

D. Amazing Grace

Forgiveness is about grace. As Liselotte Terrell has said so beautifully about her own experience, we humans cannot find in ourselves the wherewithal to forgive another who has injured or offended us. We have to have God's help. If we will open our inner doors, however, the Spirit of God will come in to help us in our weakness and enable us to say those magic words, "I forgive you." Amazingly, when we utter those words, we will find that the same Spirit will let us know that we are forgiven, just as the words of liturgy remind us, "In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven." Why do we need to hear this? Because we are sinners, every one of us. If you think you are not, then remember that at the center of sin is pride! Forgiveness is God's way for flawed humankind. We cannot do without the assurance that we are okay with God even though we have sinned and done what is evil in God's sight and in our own. Forgiveness is Eternity's emissary to sinners. What is true for us as individuals is true also when it comes to the forming of community with other sinners. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained to the seminarians at Finkenwalde, "It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren [and sisters]."³

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (New York and Evanston: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1954), 20.