

The Forgiving Journey

by Msgr. William English

Every person has many experiences of being hurt and angry at another or others. There is absolutely no way around it. This is certainly true of all who come to Saint Luke Institute (SLI). Individual and group therapy helps our clients look at the impact that hurt and trauma have on them. In addition to therapy, the anger this generates often needs to be wrestled with as part of the spiritual journey. It can be helpful to examine the journey of forgiveness in relationships more thoroughly.

The experience of hurt and anger is obviously painful. Yet, with spiritual consideration and care, it can become an opportunity to look at our need to forgive. Forgiveness is rarely an easy task because of the pain that has been experienced. Yet, for believers, that challenge is also made even more urgent by the clear invitation and desire of God that we forgive one another as we have been forgiven by God (Eph. 4:32). Even when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

While this can seem like a tall order, it is also important to acknowledge that sometimes we inadvertently make forgiveness harder for ourselves because we misunderstand what it is really all about. Forgiveness is not forgetting the past. It is not condoning the painful event or trauma which happened. Rather, it is acknowledging and clearly facing the past and making a conscious choice to not let it maintain its hold on us. Further, reconciliation is not the same thing as forgiveness. Reconciliation refers to the healing of a relationship that sometimes can accompany forgiveness. Yet there are many times when reconciliation in relationships is not only *not possible*, but it is *not wise*, or even desirable.

But even when relationships cannot be healed, forgiveness is still possible, because it is a choice. It is not a feeling. It is a decision that we make. We can choose to forgive, even when we do not feel forgiving. We often have to do things which we do not feel like doing, but we make a choice to do them. God does not demand that we feel forgiving. Rather, God asks us to forgive and to do so gratuitously and frequently (Matt. 18:22).

While forgiveness is a choice, it is also accurate to say it is a gift – a gift that God has given to us first – that is undeserved and unmerited because of our sins. It is also a gift which we give to others who have wronged or harmed us. When we give that gift, it is also not merited by the person we are forgiving, and it may not even be known by the other. It is given without strings attached.

After the choice is made and we give the gift of forgiveness to another, that is still not the end of the forgiving journey. Unlike a physical present, given only once, forgiveness as a choice often has to be given again. The feelings connected to the past hurt do not simply disappear, but often continue to surface in painful, sometimes debilitating, ways. It is important in this process that we name and deal with whatever feelings we experience. They may include shame, fear, powerlessness or hatred. We may experience a desire for revenge, self-righteousness, or bitterness. Clients at SLI have discovered very quickly that therapy is usually necessary and quite desirable in order to get in touch with the depth of the hurt, to want to forgive, and to deal with the feelings that continue after the choice to forgive is first made. This journey of forgiveness continues long after they leave SLI.

When these feelings of hurt and anger resurface, we are gently invited again to repeat the choice we have made to give the gift of forgiveness. If we make a choice to forgive, and continue to make that choice when the feelings connected with past hurts surface, then the hurt may lessen over time. One day, the feelings about the experience may catch up to the choice. But even if those feelings never catch up, if we repeat the conscious choice to forgive, we will be doing what the Lord is always inviting us to do.

The really good news for us in all of this is that we are not alone in making this choice to forgive. Our loving God never asks us to do something so extremely difficult without His help. It is very possible there may be a time when someone is absolutely unable to forgive another person with their own willpower because of the depth of the hurts which have been experienced. In these instances, we recall as people of faith that God is our higher power. We can ask God to help us want to forgive. God always wants to help us, for it is God who placed the idea of forgiveness into our hearts. God always initiates a desire for forgiveness within us. God's power, as we slowly open to it, can make what seems impossible to us quite possible. "Ask and you shall receive" (Luke 11:9). Of course, this verse also reminds us that we must ask, and cooperate with God's freely given grace.

Anger around unmet expectations can also emerge in our relationships with ourselves, another, or an institution like the church. The invitation from God is always the same: to make the choice to give the gift of forgiveness, to ask for help, and to be open to receive it.

Even if we do all of these things in our forgiveness journey, there is yet another possible path on the road. In addition to forgiving another for hurts caused to us, we sometimes have to remember to make the choice to give the gift of forgiveness to ourselves as well, for the hurts we have caused or carry. Even more amazing, we may also need to forgive God!

What do I mean? It is sometimes hard for us to acknowledge anger we might feel toward God. How often we easily cast blame on God or become angry with God for unanswered prayer, for sudden illness, for natural disasters, or for the death of someone close to us, to name a few examples. To acknowledge that we have experienced hurt in our relationship with God is something we can honestly recognize. It does not mean that God has done anything wrong. It may simply mean that God did not do things the way we wanted or expected. In other words, God did not meet our expectations. Forgiving God in this sense is acknowledging God's fullness and mystery and ultimately complete and utter love for us, even if we do not always feel that love. It can be one of the roughest roads on the forgiving journey.

The journey of forgiveness is sometimes a very long one, full of unexpected and often difficult challenges. However, this long road can lead us to an ability to release ourselves from the control anger and hurt can have in our lives, a sense of healing and inner peace, even in the midst of emotional distress, and a capability to grow in our capacity to forgive ourselves and deepen our relationship with God. It is most certainly worth the journey, and it is a journey the Lord is always inviting us to take with him.

Journal Exercise: Questions for Self-Reflection

1. *Do I find it harder to forgive myself, or another person?*
2. *When I want to make a choice to give the gift of forgiveness, how spontaneously do I ask God for help? How has God helped me to forgive?*
3. *Have I ever felt hurt by God, been angry at God, and realized that I needed to forgive God? Have I done so? Why or why not?*
4. *Do I pray for the person I need to forgive or have forgiven? Why or why not?*
5. *Have I forgiven someone once, and then later discovered that past painful feelings have resurfaced? Do I experience that as an invitation from God inviting me to forgive that person again?*



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