

One year ago a stranger stabbed Father Matt Marino in the chest. Why he forgave her. | Opinion

In the past year, Father Matt Marino has thought a lot about forgiveness.

This, of course, isn't a new topic for a priest. And the word "forgiveness" is right there in the greeting for Trinity Parish, the more than 200-year-old Episcopal Church in the heart of St. Augustine. *Welcome to grace, forgiveness and hope in Jesus Christ.*

"It's in our mission to forgive," he said.

But he realizes it's one thing to say, another to do. He quotes something C.S. Lewis said in the aftermath of World War II: "Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive."

Marino certainly had things to forgive before [Oct. 23, 2024](#). But that was the morning he was sitting in front of a St. Augustine restaurant with a friend, waiting for it to open for breakfast, when a young woman rode by on a bike, stopped, approached him and said, "I've got a lot of problems."

He'd never seen her before, but he instinctively went into pastoral mode.

He had been leaning back in his chair, the way his mother always hated. He leaned forward, putting all four legs of the chair on the ground, unfolded his arms and invited the woman to tell him her story.

That's when she unfolded *her* arms and he saw a knife.

She leaned forward and in a seemingly emotionless act — "almost like she was plugging in a curling iron," he says — stuck the knife into his chest, plunging it so deep that it hit ribs in his back, then pulled it out.

Even though he had the surreal sensation of feeling a knife go through his body and come back out, his first reaction also was almost matter-of-fact, even calm.

He said to the woman: "Hey, you stabbed me."

"That's when the look on her face completely changed," he said. "It just went kind of dark and evil. It was like the first stab she didn't know what she was doing and the second one was, 'I'm gonna finish it.'"

As he stood up and started backing away, others stopped the woman.

Marino coughed and bright, bubbly blood came out of his mouth. He knew then he had a punctured lung. He coughed again. More blood. Then he felt something on his leg and realized that even though he was wearing an absorbent shirt and tight belt, the blood from a chest wound was running down his leg.

"I thought, 'I'm in trouble, I've got to get on the ground,'" he said.

Lying on the ground, he thought about how this wasn't a good day for him to die. He had important meetings. He wanted to reach into his pocket, grab his phone and text his friends, tell them he might be a no-show.

Hearing is one of the last senses you lose when unconscious. And lying on the ground, drifting in and out, he could hear bystanders reacting. He could hear the sirens. He could hear the first responders frantically working on him.

"It was obvious things weren't going well, and they did not expect me to make it," he said.

He could hear his friend talking on the phone to other clergy at the church, saying: "No, I don't think there's any way. There's just way too much blood."

After the Stabbing

Some of the details he learned later.

He learned that the knife didn't just puncture his lung, it hit his pulmonary artery.

He learned that he likely would've died right there if Kris Culver, a customs and border patrol training officer, hadn't been driving by moments after the stabbing. Culver saw him on the ground, stopped and used something in his go-bag that, Marino was told later, few people in the entire county would've had on hand: a combat chest seal.

He learned that his wife, Kari, was in their home not far from the restaurant when the stabbing happened. She heard the sirens, too. She stopped and said a prayer for whoever was in trouble.

He learned that earlier that morning, the woman who'd told him she had lots of problems had gone into a McDonald's and threatened a worker with the knife and that when the woman was later asked why she hadn't stabbed that girl, she said: "The voices told me, not this one."

He learned that after she chose to stab him, she hopped back on her bike and rode away from the scene.

He learned that about two hours later, police arrested Ariana Gibbs.

Gibbs, 22, was charged with second-degree attempted murder, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, felony battery, burglary of a dwelling or conveyance, and petit theft.

Her legal fate has yet to be determined. She was ruled incompetent to stand trial in December, then competent in May. She has a Nov. 3 pretrial hearing.

But not long after six days in the hospital, when [Marino spoke publicly about what had happened](#), we learned that he had already done something.

He forgave Ariana Gibbs.

The poison of not forgiving

This, more than anything, is why I wanted to talk to Father Matt a year later.

He and some friends plan to go Juniper Market on the anniversary. He's been back quite a few times since last October. He hasn't been trying to avoid the reminders of what happened there that morning.

To the contrary, he says he thinks about the stabbing every day.

That's partly because his lingering physical issues make it impossible to *not* think about.

It isn't just that there is the scar from the knife wound and larger scars from the treatment. In the procession at church, he gets winded. When he tries to jog he doesn't have the stamina he did before. And when he tried to surf, he laid on the board and broke a rib.

"That wasn't happening before," he said.

He says a year ago, at age 60, he felt like he was 50. Now he feels like he's 70.

"I'm sure I lost 5 to 10 years off my life because of that day, and I'll probably have to retire a few years earlier than the financial plan called for just because I'll run out of steam," he said. "But the issue is: Do you want to go around holding on to the poison of not forgiving?"

That's the other reason he thinks about this every day — the idea of forgiveness.

He says that it really wasn't a difficult decision to forgive the woman accused of stabbing him.

"To be wrapped with unforgiveness for someone that I'm not sure had any power over herself, it just feels like it just feels completely foolish," he said. "I forgive her, because honestly, I think forgiveness is the Christian life... It's a way of living in the world where we depend on the atoning, reconciling work of Jesus to destroy the power of sin and death — which is all theological language for 'God forgave us.'"

When we're talking about doing the forgiving, we sometimes say: Can you find it in your heart?

Marino says it isn't a matter of the heart. It's one of the mind.

“It’s a decision,” he said. “We choose to forgive somebody and we make our heart follow along.”

He points to Jeremiah 17 — *the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked* – and adds with a laugh: “I can’t wait for my heart to want to do the right thing. It generally just has bad inclinations.”

He’s thought about this a lot in the past year, partly because of his personal experience, partly because of what he sees happening in the world. He says our lives seem to be consumed with grievances and seeking “justice” for offenses in which the stakes often are fairly low.

“Unforgiveness,” he says, “is a terrible kind of enslavement.”

This leads to another point he makes about forgiveness. We tend to think of this as something we do for someone else, when really it’s something we can do for ourselves. It’s what frees us.

He points to Erika Kirk’s public forgiveness of her husband’s killer followed by Tim Allen forgiving his father’s killer and says he found these acts “remarkably powerful.”

He does have lingering questions about what happened a year ago.

“I am curious: Why did Arieana pick me?” he said. “Was it because I was wearing a collar? Was it because a voice told her to do that? I’ll probably never know what that poor girl had going on in her head. *She* may not know.

“I hope she gets sanity back. I hope she gets health and healing. I hope that the justice system does whatever it has to do to keep others safe.”

But that is all separate from what he did. And at the end of the conversation, he says if he were to be quoted on one thing, he’d like it to be this: “Forgiveness has changed my life, and it can change yours, too.”

He means this in the Biblical sense, the forgiveness of God, but also in the personal one. Forgiveness is a lovely idea, *especially* when you have something to forgive.

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