



¹ Does forgiving someone mean you forget the wrong? Does the Bible require that we forget the sin committed? No, it does not.

The sin happened and we cannot – and should not – blot it out and pretend it did not happen. Pushing down the memory, forgetting the wrong so to speak, can ultimately lead to deeper wrongs when we later act out. You all know the statistics around children that are abused growing up into adults who become abusers as one example. It's not always true- but

when we refuse to face the wrongs done to us, when we push the memories so deep into our subconscious in an effort to deny they ever happened, it can lead to catastrophic consequences later in life.

Having said that we should not forget that wrongs done to us mean they remain front and center all the time. We can choose to forgive and live forward – not bound forever by the wrong. Jesus commands us to forgive, and forgive and forgive. He doesn't say we are to forget. Part of forgiving means putting the wrong into its proper place and not having our remembrance of the wrong become the driver of our lives.

Sometimes the wrong done to us can lead us into being a stronger, more authentic self. Sometimes the wrong can lead us to be more empathetic with others when we can share our experiences and the growth that can come from them. In the best circumstances we can see our part in what went wrong, if any, and determine not to repeat the same mistakes. This applies whether we are talking about a wrong done to us by someone else or a wrong we commit against ourselves- when we behave in a way that does not honor ourselves or others.

I've deliberately used sin, wrong, harm as meaning the same thing: that we have not respected the honor and dignity of another. And I'm also aware that what I consider to be a sin or a wrong or a harm might not be something the other person is aware of or if aware considers to be a sin, a wrong or a harm. Facing each other with our hurts, with truth and love, can be part of the healing process.

There are three Bible verses, in particular, that I fall back on when times are tough and especially when I've felt someone has treated me unfairly. One is Genesis 50:20 where Joseph reminds his brothers that what they meant as harmful - throwing Joseph into the well- God found a way to turn into good. Or in Jeremiah, chapter 29, verse 11: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope". Or Romans chapter 8 verse 28: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose".

Jesus from the cross asks God to "forgive them for they know not what they do" but he didn't say to forget what they did in nailing him to that cross. He didn't try to slough it off or say it didn't matter when it clearly did.

¹ <http://fbcmethuen.org/page/4/?sermons-category=luke> (2/23/2019)

Forgiveness is a topic that many wonderful and wise writers have struggled with. They have left us with thoughts to ponder.

Debie Thomas writes:

If forgiveness isn't denial or a detour, if forgiveness isn't quick — then what is it? What is Jesus asking of us when he asks us to love, bless, pray, give, lend, do good, withhold judgment, extend mercy, and turn the other cheek?

In her popular memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes that withholding forgiveness is like [my] drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. Nora Gallagher writes, "Forgiveness is a way to unburden oneself from the constant pressure of rewriting the past." Henri Nouwen writes, "Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly, and so we need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. Forgiveness is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family."

If these writers are correct, then I think forgiveness is choosing to foreground love instead of resentment. If I'm consumed with my own pain, if I've made injury my identity, if I insist on weaponizing my well-deserved anger in every interaction I have with people who hurt me, then I'm drinking poison, and the poison will kill me long before it does anything to my abusers. To choose forgiveness is to release myself from the tyranny of bitterness. To give up my frenzied longing to be understood and vindicated by anyone other than God. To cast my hunger for justice deep into Christ's heart, because justice belongs to him, and he's the only one powerful enough to secure it.²

As one of you said to me many years ago, forgiveness is intentionally giving up the space in my brain that has been taken over with shame, blame, a desire for vengeance or other emotions that are counter-productive to being a Christian. When I forgive, I'm choosing to let my brain open up to the light and love of Jesus. Forgiveness is not easy and it shouldn't be. Forgiveness is something we should have to choose – to put love foremost and to understand that we are human and we will hurt each other from time to time. Forgiveness is from us to others, from others to us, and from us and to us. Sometimes the hardest forgiveness is to forgive ourselves.

We all make bad choices from time to time. We all fail, from time to time, to honor and respect the dignity of every human being and all parts of creation. And when we do, we need to stop, learn from what we did, and then forgive ourselves, making a commitment to not repeating the same mistake. Sometimes that means talking to the person who hurt you, letting them know they hurt you and seeking reconciliation.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor in Colorado – she's pretty far "out there" for me but what she writes about this topic hits home. She says:

"Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn't actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we're not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So what if forgiveness, rather than being a pansy way to say, 'It's okay,' is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it's saying, 'What

² Debie Thomas: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay> (2/19/2019)

you did was so *not* okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.’? Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter. And free people are dangerous people. Free people aren’t controlled by the past. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And *that’s* worth fighting for.”

Maybe it’s also why our Lord’s Prayer reminds us that we pray for God to forgive us as we forgive others. We need God’s forgiveness, which has no boundaries, as a model for us who too often want to measure out our forgiveness in stingy bits. God challenges us to forgive as God forgives- now and always. Not keeping score but loving our neighbor as ourselves. Learning to love ourselves so we can love others. Learning that acts of forgiveness can be transformative. Through forgiving – ourselves and others- we can become more Christ-like and be a beacon to the world.

In that light, I ask you to turn in your Book of Common Prayer to page 449 (Reconciliation of a Penitent)[read together but when we come to acknowledgment of sin, please do not say aloud].

Amen.