



09/13/2020 The Pain Behind The Wrong
Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103: 8-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

In *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, the late Fred Rogers, portrayed by actor Tom Hanks, describes forgiveness as "a decision we make to release a person from the feelings of anger we have against them." There is no doubt that according to the gravity of an offense, we experience varied degrees of anger and hurt. That is a natural reaction to the boundary's violation and the breach of trust that has happened. But holding on to grudge, brooding on the offense, and harboring thoughts of revenge have the unpleasant result of keeping one hostage in the victim state. In the Buddhist Tradition there is a distinction between the pain that has been inflicted by another and the suffering that keeps a person stuck in reliving the experience in her mind over and over. Unless a shift in perspective happens, one remains flooded and overwhelmed by feelings of hurt, violation, worthlessness, and abandonment. The victim plays the tape of the abuse in a continuous loop, and the rage builds up. The creative imagination necessary for a constructive change gets constricted into a tunnel vision that reduces the options to the mutually exclusive habitual forms of fight, flight, or freeze. One may, by habit and not choice, get into a fight mode and the only relief imagined to the feelings powerlessness and hopelessness is to make the offender pay. Or one may retreat, again by habit, into isolation and sulkiness. Or, finally, one may freeze into numbness and helplessness. All three habitual responses are a reaction to the grief over "something" that has broken: a relationship, a dream, an agreement, a social contract.

Yet, one may also choose a fourth option instructed by compassion emerging from deep seated spiritual values. Stories of forgiveness abound.¹ One good example is Rais Bhuiyan's story. He was working as a convenience store clerk when he was fired upon by a revenge-killer following the 9/11 attacks. Bhuiyan survived and his assailer was arrested, found guilty, and sentenced to death. Bhuiyan, a practicing Muslim, after religious reflection forgave his assailant and, with the families of other victims, sought to prevent his execution. Although they were unsuccessful, their actions caused the shooter to renounce violence.²

All Scripture passages assigned for today's worship service report stories and admonitions that challenge us to expand our concept and practice of forgiveness. Our perspective is broadened by the good news that God's forgiveness is not based on our idea of fairness, but rather on abundant and unimaginable grace. Looking at the story of Joseph and how his brothers come begging after having sold him into slavery, it is easy for us to say that they really did not deserve forgiveness. Even their plea for forgiveness sounds dishonest and manipulative. On the other hand, God, the psalmist muses, "does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (v. 10). And just like God, the king in Matthew's story is moved with compassion and is ready to forgive a servant's entire debt, no matter how enormous it is (18:23-27). Those examples challenge us to stretch our imagination and opt to forgive each other. It starts, as Paul reminds us, with the commitment to stop passing judgment on

¹ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/>

² <https://soundcloud.com/snapjudgment/this-an-eye-for-an-eye-for-an-eye>



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one another. All of us must stand or fall before God. When we expect people to fall by their evil doing, God may have a different idea and is able to make them stand and to reconcile them to their humanity.

That is perhaps why, with Peter, we must learn to stop keeping score (vv. 21-22). It is not a matter of being patient for a certain number of times until we say in exasperation: "That is it. I am done with him/her. I cannot deal with this anymore. I am out of here." And we stomp out of a relationship. Obviously, if it is an abusive relationship, one must find the strength to leave. If the environment is toxic, one needs to show love to oneself, engage in self-protective measures, and eventually even opt for physical separation asserting one's boundaries. It is better to face the grief of a broken heart and the hardship of being alone rather than stay in an abusive relationship. The pressure to forgive may easily lock a person into an unhealthy relationship. Dramatically, in the worst cases of domestic violence it has all too often resulted in repeated physical harm and even death.

However, here Jesus is not referring to abusive relationships and is continuing his instruction on how to handle conflicts. His response to Peter's question (including the parable) takes forgiveness out of the "countable" category and places it into the realm of the incalculable. Forgiveness is part of the merciful plan of God's salvation available to all; it is part of God's Kingdom economy where all people are welcome; it is part of God's provision for a world of abundance and in which all are winners and none are losers.

So, forgiveness is not simply being patient with one another. When people do things that are offensive to us, they may not even realize what they are doing.³ They are simply ignorant and oblivious of how their behavior and choices impact us. That is when we need to be patient with people's fallacies and correct them *if* they are open to a new input (no unsolicited advice, please.) Of course, we do not want to approach them with a sense of self-righteousness and superiority missing the plank in our own eye.⁴

Forgiveness is not a matter of tolerance, either. People are used to their way of doing things. They keep on doing things out of habit either because they work for them or because they have a hard time at correcting their habits. Those are the idiosyncrasies that can unnerve us, those apparently unchangeable mental blocks that keep repeating themselves and may drive us to exasperation. Those may be accompanied by innumerable promises and just about the same number of broken agreements. They are the quirks that may drain the energy out of relationships. When that broken trust happens again and again one needs to be extra careful not to fall into the trap of expressing one's frustration by regressing into contempt, criticism, name-calling, emotional withdrawal, and ridicule: all forms of defensiveness. We pick up social skills and develop emotional intelligence as we grow and assess our level of success in

³ Luke 23:34

⁴ Matthew 7:1-6



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starting and maintaining relationships. By trial and error, we learn to navigate relationships and conflicts. But skills can also be developed and sustained with the help of professionals and mentors.⁵

So, forgiveness is not just a matter of being patient with others. And it is not even a matter of using tolerance. Peter's self-revealing question to Jesus ("Lord, how often should I forgive, seven times?") seems to suggest that there is a limit to one's magnanimity. Peter is correct at raising that question if he bases his ability to forgive on his personal understanding of fairness and "enough-ness." When we do that calculation, we become judges and score keepers; we assign a value to a relationship and determine the amount of energy we are willing to invest to keep it alive. But in so doing, aren't we assuming a utilitarian approach to relationships? Aren't we engaging in the world with a profit mentality where people and things are discarded as soon as they do not benefit me anymore?

Patience and tolerance in relationships are good and even necessary; but there must be more to forgiveness as Jesus' response seems to imply. The large number he uses in his reply invites us to approach forgiveness from another angle. By the Kingdom's standards, it is about creating communities where the Spirit's creative energy is operational. Forgiveness is a matter of compassion. The focus shifts from how many times I have been offended and how often should I humanly be expected to forgive to how best can I grow in the likeness of God.⁶ After all, one might be doing or saying things I don't like simply as a reaction to something I might have done or said. I might be totally surprised by a certain behavior and feel unfairly treated and expect an apology while the other person has been wronged by me and expects me to take the first step and apologize. We are both stuck in our pride. While we both feel in the right and we are both in pain. If we do not have the emotional capacity and are unwilling to approach each other, we are both diminished in our humanity and in the ability to show compassion.

The best attribute for God is compassion, which means that the best way to express divine power is to show compassion. In Hebrew, the word for "mercy" or "compassion," ("ra-cha-min,") is derived from the name of the most motherly organ in the human body: the womb ("re-chem").⁷ Thus, God's creative compassion is womb-like, generative of new realities, of communion and meant for community building. From this perspective, by learning to forgive the offending other, we learn what it means to be closest to God's womb and become truly human. Compassion qualifies us as human beings.

Episcopal priest and author, Matthew Fox, explains it this way: "Compassion is the living out of our interdependence. Compassion is about sharing the joy and sharing the pain—and doing what we can to relieve the pain, especially that caused by injustices whether they be ecological, economic, social, racial, gender, or generational in nature. Compassion requires the calling forth, the educing, the educating

⁵ Scientific resources to navigate conflict in families and in the professional world can be found at The Gottman Institute developed by John and Julie Gottman (<https://www.gottman.com/>).

⁶ Matthew 5:7; Luke 6:36; Ephesians 4:32; James 2;13

⁷ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/compassion>



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therefore of our deepest capacities as a species: Our capacity to act as if we truly are part and parcel of one another, in joy as well as in sorrow.”⁸

Considering our interconnectedness, then, we come to realize that what we call “sin” is none other than the breakdown of this cosmic union. We also learn that what emerges as an offense to others develops out of one’s pain and wounded self. Our attempts at expressing ourselves, our needs, our qualities, and our hopes are a profound desire to make our truth evident. But most of the times we mess up, we encounter our own biases, we feel confounded by our own limits and crash against our pride. When we feel wounded by someone’s actions or inactions, words or silence, we may want to consider that what they might be trying to express comes out of their desire to live out of their inner beauty, even if it is communicated in a cacophony of fear and with a choice of words and actions that don’t match our perceptions. It may be an involuntary ugly rendition of that beauty; it may possibly be a short-sided expression of their understanding of their needs. We may feel offended when we are at the receiving end of their sad expressions. But in the end, we need to consider: Doesn’t that happen to all of us? Don’t we all want to be treated with compassion, with “humanity”? We are after all, as St. Paul describes the human condition, a “treasure in earthen vessels.”

People do things out of ignorance. Be patient. Teach.

People do things out of habit. Be tolerant. Nudge.

People do things out of pain. Be compassionate. Forgive. Amen.

Restoring Relationships by Richard Rohr
Sunday, September 6, 2020

Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced. —James Baldwin (1924–1987)

Almost all religions and cultures that I know of have believed in one way or another that sin and evil are to be punished and that retribution is to be demanded of the sinner—in this world and usually the next world, too. Such *retributive justice* promotes a dualistic system of reward and punishment, good people and bad people, and makes perfect sense to the ego. I call it the economy of merit or “meritocracy.” This system seems to be the best that prisons, courtrooms, wars, and even most of the church are equipped to do. The trouble is that we defined God as “punisher in chief” instead of Healer, Forgiver, and Reconciler; thus, the retribution model was legitimized all the way down!

⁸ Matthew Fox, Compassion: Another “C” that Defines our Humanity, September 4, 2020, daily meditation.



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However, Jesus, many mystics, Indigenous cultures, and other wisdom traditions show an alternative path toward healing. In these traditions, sin and failure are an opportunity for the transformation of the person harmed, the person causing harm, and the community. Mere counting and ledger-keeping are not the way of the Gospel. Our best self wants to restore relationships, and not just blame or punish. This is the “economy of grace” and an operative idea of *restorative justice*.

After being wronged, few human beings can move ahead with dignity without a full and honest exposure of the truth, as well as accountability. *You cannot heal what you do not acknowledge*. Hurt does not just go away on its own; it needs to be spoken and heard. Only then is there a possibility of “restorative justice,” which is what the prophets invariably promise to the people of Israel (as in Ezekiel 16:53-63; Isaiah 57:17-19) and Jesus illustrates in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) and throughout his healing ministry.

While I can talk about restorative justice from the framework of Scripture and theology, this week I will rely on experts in the field. Teachers and practitioners Elaine Enns and Ched Myers define restorative justice and peacemaking as “a range of nonviolent responses to injustice, violation, and/or violence with the aim of

1. reducing or halting the presenting violence in order that
 2. victims and offenders (as well as their communities and other stakeholders) can collectively identify harms, needs, and responsibilities so that
 3. they can determine how to make things as right as possible, which can include covenants of accountability, restitution, reparations and (ideally) reconciliation.”
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We all need to apologize, and we all need to forgive, for humanity to have a sustainable future. Otherwise, we are controlled by the past, individually and corporately. History easily devolves into taking sides, bitterness, holding grudges, and the violence that



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inevitably follows. No wonder that almost two-thirds of Jesus' teaching is directly or indirectly about forgiveness. As others have said, "Forgiveness is to let go of our hope for a different past." *Reality is what it is*, and such acceptance leads to great freedom, and the possibility of healing forgiveness.

Restorative Love by Richard Rohr
Monday, September 7, 2020

As we read the Bible, God does not change as much as our knowledge of God evolves. I certainly recognize there are many biblical passages that present God as punitive and retributive, but we must stay with the text—and observe how we gradually let God grow up. Focusing on divine retribution leads to an ego-satisfying and eventually unworkable image of God which situates us inside of a very unsafe and dangerous universe. Both Jesus and Paul observed the human tendency toward retribution and spoke strongly about the limitations of the law.

The biblical notion of justice, beginning in the Hebrew Scriptures with the Jewish prophets—especially Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea—is quite different. If we read carefully and honestly, we will see that God's justice is *restorative*. In each case, after the prophet chastises the Israelites for their transgressions against YHWH, the prophet continues by saying, in effect, "And here's what YHWH will do for you: God will now love you more than ever! God will love you into wholeness. God will pour upon you a gratuitous, unbelievable, unaccountable, irrefutable love that you will finally be unable to resist."

God "punishes" us by loving us more! How else could divine love be supreme and victorious? Check out this theme for yourself: Read such passages as Isaiah 29:13–24, Hosea 6:1–6, Ezekiel 16 (especially verses 59–63), and so many of the Psalms. God's justice is fully successful when God can legitimate and validate human beings in their original and total identity! God wins by making sure we win—just as any loving human



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parent does. The little “time outs” and discipline along the way are simply to keep us awake and growing.

Love is the only thing that transforms the human heart. In the Gospels, we see Jesus fully revealing this divine wisdom. Love takes the shape and symbolism of healing and radical forgiveness—which is just about all that Jesus does. Jesus, who represents God, usually transforms people at the moments when they most hate themselves, when they most feel shame or guilt, or want to punish themselves. Look at Jesus’ interaction with the tax collector Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10). He doesn’t belittle or punish Zacchaeus; instead, Jesus goes to his home, shares a meal with him, and treats him like a friend. Zacchaeus’ heart is opened and transformed. Only then does Zacchaeus commit to making reparations for the harm he has done.

As Isaiah says of God, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways” (Isaiah 55:8). Yet I am afraid we largely pulled God down into “our thoughts.” We think fear, anger, divine intimidation, threat, and punishment are going to lead people to love. Show me where that has worked. You cannot lead people to the highest level of motivation by teaching them the lowest. God always and forever models the highest, and our task is merely to “imitate God” (Ephesians 5:1).