

Forgiving Ourselves
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*Negative feelings are like stray cats.
The more you feed them,
the more they hang around.*

Reading: Matthew 18:21-22

A stranger walked toward the gates of a new city. By the side of the road sat an old wise woman who hailed the traveler: "Welcome."

"What kind of people are they who live here?" the traveler asked.

"How did you find them in the home city you left?" asked the wise woman

"They were gossips, mean-spirited, and often selfish. Difficult to get along with."

"You'll find the people of this city to be likewise."

Later a second stranger passed by and was welcomed by the old woman.

"What kind of people are they who live here?" the second traveler asked.

"How did you find them in your home city?"

"They were fine people—industrious, open-minded, and easy to get along with."

"You'll find the people of this city to be likewise."

The condition of our hearts will often determine how we see the world and how we experience others. If our hearts are open and loving, we can see that which is good and valuable in others and in ourselves.

I found this refreshing account in Jack Kornfield's book, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*.

In the Babemba tribe of South Africa, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he is placed in the center of the village, alone and unfettered. All work ceases, and every man, woman, and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual. Then each person in the tribe

speaks to the accused, one at a time, each recalling the good things the person in the center of the circle has done in his lifetime. Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with any detail and accuracy, is recounted. All his positive attributes, good deeds, strength, and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length. This tribal ceremony often lasts for several days. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe.

This is a remarkable example of a community keeping its heart open and loving toward an offender. And in doing this, it colors what it sees in that person—all the good and positive things. The negative, bad actions are not ignored; they are obvious and apparent to all. Rather, they attempt to overcome the darkness not with more darkness, but with light.

Today I want to talk a bit about forgiveness. Most of the time in the Bible forgiveness is about God's limitless, unconditional and absolute forgiveness. But today, I want to talk about human forgiveness—how important it is in our own quest for happiness and peace.

God's peace, of course, is not something that we enter just at the end of our lives. It is something we can enter every day, every moment. May this be the kind of place where we acknowledge this endless internal work and encourage each other to do just that.

My central point is this: **We do not forgive others in order to be forgiven by God. We forgive others in order to forgive ourselves.**

The problem is not whether God forgives. God is all-forgiving. God's heart is infinitely open and receptive. God recounts every positive attribute and moment in loving detail. God's forgiveness comes to all people without condition. The problem is whether we can forgive ourselves.

Not forgiving ourselves is a huge obstacle to experiencing peace and happiness. It prevents us from feeling that boundless grace and love of God. Not forgiving ourselves prevents the reality and the beauty of The Sacred from sinking in.

There's an old Hasidic story passed along by Parker Palmer that illustrates what I am trying to say:

The pupil comes to the rebbe and asks, "Why does the Torah tell us to 'place these words upon your hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?" The rebbe answers, "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So, we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks, and the words fall in."

When the heart breaks open, the words fall in. And this, my friends, is precisely what happens when we forgive others—our hearts break open. And when this happens, the reality of God’s loving presence falls in, and we can finally forgive ourselves. And we are blessed with peace, joy and freedom.

Look, every Sunday I say, “We are forgiven.” But 99% of the time those words lay on top of our hearts; they do not sink in. In order to truly forgive ourselves our hearts need to be broken open. And it is absolutely impossible to truly forgive someone without breaking open your heart. If your heart has not broken open, then you have not really forgiven the other. All you have done is engaged in some kind of mental gymnastics.

Now if you are like me, you might respond to this by saying, “No problem. I have been there, done that. I’ve forgiven everyone I’ve needed to, and yet I still don’t feel that great joy and peace.”

Well, my friends, as they often say in the recovering community, “Denial is not just a river in Egypt!” And so preaching to myself I say, “Steve, my friend, you’re full of crap on this point.” When it comes to forgiveness, there is always unfinished business. It is never done.

His disciples said, “Jesus, how often do we have to keep forgiving this other person—seven times?” Jesus says to them, “Why don’t you try 70 times seven!” “Look,” he says, “it never ends.”

And so here is another central point: **We each have someone(s) to forgive—right now. Always.** And if you think you have already forgiven that person, do it again. Humor me. After all, what is it going to hurt? In fact, go ahead and do it 70 times seven times.

Someone once said, “Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past.” We say, “I wish that that never happened.” Forgiveness means letting go of changing the past.

Often in our regret and resentment, we hold on to the past. And our hearts are not truly open to the present. Often, our hearts are hard and closed to protect ourselves from being hurt again. This is perfectly understandable. But the pain of the past controls us. It is like we close up the barn, but the horses, you see, have already left. And closing up the barn will not return those horses!

Now at this point I want to mention an important point that Kornfield makes:

Forgiveness does not mean that we have to continue to relate to those who have done us harm.

In some cases the best practice may be to end our connection, to never speak to or be with a harmful person again...

In the end, forgiveness simply means never putting another person out of our heart.

It is all about breaking open our hearts, again and again. Peace is not about being undisturbed and unfazed; it is about being vulnerable. Peace is not being indifferent; it is about living with an open heart. “Withdrawal is not true inner peace,” he writes.

Simple withdrawal and indifference is avoidance. And what is it that we are trying so hard to avoid? That we cannot forgive ourselves. We have two basic problems: First, the world is unfair. Sometimes people mistreat us. Sometimes things happen that we cannot control. Second, we blame ourselves for this. Judging and withholding forgiveness of others is mostly a cover-up that we judge ourselves and curse ourselves under our breath.

You all know that observation that when you point your finger at someone, you have three other fingers secretly pointing at yourself. I say that we usually start out with those fingers pointing at ourselves, and we turn one of them on others to distract ourselves from this. But that is all it is—a distraction.

This kind sheds new light on Jesus’ plea, “Do not judge, so that *you* may not be judged.” If I judge others, I cannot deal with my own self-judgment. I am distracted. If I cannot forgive others, how can I expect to forgive myself?

But when I forgive someone, my heart breaks open. I then see the world differently—others and then myself. Jack Kornfield relates the following insight by Alan Wallace:

Imagine walking along a sidewalk with your arms full of groceries, and someone roughly bumps into you so that you fall and your groceries are strewn over the ground. As you rise up for the puddle of broken eggs and tomato juice, you are ready to shout out, “You idiot! What’s wrong with you? Are you blind?” But just before you can catch your breath to speak, you see that the person who bumped into you actually is blind. He, too, is sprawled in the spilled groceries, and your anger vanishes in an instant, to be replaced by sympathetic concern: “Are you hurt? Can I help you up?”

When we forgive someone, our heart breaks open, and God’s words fall in. Compassion and love enter us, and we see the other one differently. We see ourselves differently. We see that it is only our blindness that causes us to hurt each other. We see that we know not what we do. We let go of our anger and regret. We are released from our failures.

Roberto de Vicenzo, the famous Argentine golfer, once won a tournament, and after receiving the check and smiling for the cameras, he went to the clubhouse and prepared to leave. Sometime later he walked alone to his car in the parking lot and was approached by a young woman. She

congratulated him on his victory and then told him that her child was seriously ill and near death.

De Vincenzo was touched by her story and took out a pen and endorsed his winning check for payment to the woman. "Make some good days for the baby," he said as he pressed the check into her hand.

The next week he was having lunch in a country club when a PGA official came to his table. "Some of the guys in the parking lot last week told me you met a young woman there after you won the tournament." De Vincenzo nodded. "Well," said the official, "I have news for you. She's a phony. She's not married. She has no sick baby. She fleeced you, my friend."

You mean there is no baby who is dying?" said de Vincenzo.

"That's right."

*"That's the best news I've heard all week," said de Vincenzo.
(Kornfield, p. 38-39)*

I do not think that I would have done what de Vincenzo had done. I would not have forgiven the woman so instantaneously. And I would not have forgiven myself for being so gullible. But he had done one and then the other, with a heart that was broken open. Almost immediately, he let go of his hope for a better past and let go of anger, resentment and regret. He seems like a person who was happy and compassionate, attributes God values in us all.