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Tending Through Forgiveness

Jesus taught us to ask God for forgiveness. In the Lord's Prayer as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, we read the petition to God, "Forgive us our sins" (11:4a). Jesus also taught his followers to forgive one another. When Peter asked how many times he should forgive someone for wrongs committed against him, Jesus said that Peter's suggestion of seven times was not enough. His answer was "seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:21-22).

In what ways are we tended when we seek and offer forgiveness? In offering or in accepting forgiveness, do we tend body, heart, mind, or soul? The answer is that we may tend each one to some degree. Consider the effects of not receiving forgiveness or of withholding forgiveness from someone who has wronged you. The anger, resentment, and hurt you feel may eat at your heart, doing even further injury if the lack of forgiveness leads to a seriously damaged or broken relationship. Jesus said we are to forgive a brother and sister from our heart (Matthew 18:35b). This does not mean, however, that only the heart is tended by forgiveness. The mind may be kept from needed rest or attentive thought if wrongs are replayed over and over. The body, too, may suffer the ill effects of a troubled, angry, grieved, or guilty heart and mind. Perhaps even more than these, however, is the damage done to the soul when we do not forgive others or when we fail to seek forgiveness for ourselves. Our soul's openness to God is limited, and our relationship with God suffers until we offer forgiveness to the person who has wronged us, or accept forgiveness for ourselves.

Before looking more closely at Jesus' teaching about forgiveness, let us first consider two occasions when Jesus told individuals that their sins were forgiven. Each of the Synoptic Gospel writers recounts the story of the paralyzed man brought to Jesus by friends who avoided the crowd by lowering the man through the roof. We read in Luke, "When [Jesus] saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you' " (5:20). The scribes and Pharisees nearby accused Jesus of blasphemy. Jesus then healed the paralyzed man so that the religious leaders would recognize his authority to forgive sins. Though Jesus acknowledged the faith of the friends, he did not comment on the faith of the paralyzed man. Nor did this man profess his faith or ask for forgiveness. Nevertheless, Jesus offered forgiveness. Perhaps in making this public announcement, Jesus freed the man from the stigma of the belief common in that day that illness and disability were due to sin. Healing the man's body alone would not have made the man whole. Forgiveness healed the rest of the man's being.

Again the Pharisees questioned Jesus' authority to forgive sins when he said that a certain woman's sins were forgiven. Upon entering the home where Jesus was eating, this woman washed his feet and anointed them with ointment (Luke 7:36-50). Jesus' host, Simon, was critical of Jesus for letting this "sinful" woman touch him. Jesus pointed out Simon's lack of hospitality and the woman's act of love. As far as we know, the woman was silent. Although she did not ask for forgiveness, her humble act of devotion and love perhaps revealed her openness to forgiveness and healing. Jesus not only told her that her sins were forgiven, but he also said to her, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (v. 50). In the presence of witnesses, Jesus once again affirmed someone who had been considered unclean. His words and actions declared her whole.

Let us now turn our attention to Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. Most of what we read in the Gospels suggests that forgiveness by God is conditional on our forgiveness of others. For example, following the Lord's Prayer recorded in Matthew, we read, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (6:14-15). Likewise, in Mark we read, "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses" (11:25). Both of these passages may be heard as "if-then" statements—if we forgive others, then God will forgive us.

Does God, in fact, withhold forgiveness until we have met certain requirements? In the two examples previously cited, Jesus offered forgiveness without any word from the recipient. He asked neither the paralyzed man nor the woman at his feet about their forgiveness of others. Consider also the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The younger son acknowledged to himself that he had sinned against his father. The father, however, ran out to meet his son, put his arms around him, and kissed him before the son ever spoke. Though the young man confessed his sin, he did not ask for forgiveness before the father revealed his forgiveness and acceptance by calling for a grand celebration. Similarly, the father went out to the older son, not only signaling his continued love and acceptance but also directly pleading with him to join the family celebration. Although the particular sins of the older son were not specified, from his words and behavior we can identify his anger and resentment toward his father and his anger and jealousy—perhaps even hatred—toward his brother. The father's actions were an implicit offering of forgiveness without any sign of repentance or request for forgiveness by the older son. This parable suggests an unconditional love and grace, an unconditional forgiveness, from the father.

How can we reconcile these views of God's forgiveness? Perhaps the "condition" on God's forgiveness speaks more to our openness to receive it than it does to God's willingness to offer it. The prodigal son recognized his own sin and his need to ask for forgiveness from his father. He was therefore able to receive the forgiveness that already was being extended to him unconditionally. The older son was not ready, not available, to be forgiven. He did not receive forgiveness even though it was being offered to him. God's forgiveness and love are gracefully given to us. We tend our souls by forgiving others so that we may receive and experience God's forgiveness. Forgiveness of others is one important aspect of the "housecleaning of the soul" necessary to make room for knowing God, hearing God, and accepting God's forgiveness of us.

The psalmist writes, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, / and do not forget all his benefits— / who forgives all your iniquity. . . . The LORD is merciful and gracious, / slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. . . . He does not deal with us according to our sins, / nor repay us according to our iniquities" (103:2-3a, 8, 10). Jesus' life and words about forgiveness reveal this God who offers forgiveness and love without condition. He teaches us that to experience fully God's gracious love, we must first tend our souls by forgiving others.

" Father, Forgive Them" Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." (Luke 23:32-38)

Who heard Jesus speak these words, "Father, forgive them"? Would he have spoken these personal words to God in a voice loud enough for all those gathered around the cross to hear? Perhaps the criminals on either side heard, yet they were not around later to give a report. Many Bibles note that some ancient authorities lack verse 34, where these words are recorded. Nevertheless, the writer of these words, "Father, forgive them," thought them completely in character for Jesus to say. If the writer did not know Jesus well, he may have known others who did. At least he knew the stories about Jesus. Early followers knew that Jesus was forgiving, even to the point of forgiving those who killed him.

"Father, forgive them." Forgive whom? The Roman authorities? The Jewish religious leaders? The criminals on either side? The people who stood by watching? The disciples who had abandoned him? If Jesus wanted to forgive them all, he was offering forgiveness generously, even freely. Is the gift of forgiveness more generous than we are willing to extend to those who have wronged us? Is it more generous than we are even willing to accept for ourselves?

Jesus said, "They do not know what they are doing" (v. 34). Who did not know? The Roman authorities knew they were crucifying Jesus, the one whom Pilate refused to pronounce guilty. The Jewish religious leaders knew that they had tried to trap Jesus throughout his ministry and finally had succeeded. The criminals knew that they were guilty of their crimes. The people in the crowd knew that they had shouted to Pilate to free Barabbas and to crucify Jesus. The disciples knew that they had run away, abandoning the one they had followed, the one who had loved them for these three years. What did they not know? They did not know or understand fully who Jesus was. They did not understand the God that Jesus had tried to reveal to them.

We believe that Jesus was, and is, forgiving. We believe that God loves and forgives. Many times we have listened to sermons and Sunday school lessons that call us to confess and repent because of our sinful nature and our guilt. We are told that we must ask for forgiveness. Look, however, at the model of forgiveness in these words from the cross. Jesus asked God to forgive a group of people who did not confess their sins or repent of their sins or ask for forgiveness. He asked God to forgive people we may think do not deserve forgiveness.

Is God's forgiveness poured out to us before our confession, repentance, and humble request? If forgiveness is waiting for us, and all we must do is simply recognize and receive it, then how does God hope to elicit good behavior from us? Isn't it often the burden of guilt and the threat of punishment that keep calling us back to better behavior, back to relationship with God?

Perhaps God hopes that the gifts of our relationship with God— peace, joy, love, satisfaction, wholeness, and delight—will be enough to keep us close, as children to a parent. God sent Jesus to show us, in our own human terms, the nature of God's love for us—love given without restrictions by someone who knows us completely. God wants us to see and understand, through Jesus, the love available to us. How disappointed God must be when we talk about God's judgment and punishment as ways to push us back to God when God is offering graceful gifts to draw us close. Parents often have more success in relating to their children by offering them "carrots," or rewards, rather than "sticks," or punishments. How ironic that our Heavenly Parent offers us carrots, yet we often refuse them, insisting on sticks instead!

God freely forgives us of our sins. We must be available, however, to receive that forgiveness; and to be open and available, we must first forgive others. Forgive "her"—your mother or sister or friend or neighbor or business partner—even though she is wrong and does not deserve it. Forgive "him"—your father or brother or teacher or coach or boss—even though he is wrong and does not deserve it. Tell the person that you forgive her or him. Even if the person is dead, say, "I forgive you." The power of forgiveness is that it frees us from the lifetaking burdens of anger, bitterness, resentment, and hate. When we give what is not deserved, we are free to receive what is already given to us: undeserved forgiveness from God.

"Father, forgive them." Jesus was asking God to forgive those who had wronged him—denied, betrayed, arrested, beaten, and convicted him. Why did Jesus ask for forgiveness for unnamed people who were not asking for forgiveness, who might have thought they did not need forgiveness, and who might not have heard the words spoken over them? Perhaps Jesus' words were also for the tending of his soul, the tending of his relationship with God in those difficult final hours. Jesus could not personally extend forgiveness to each person who had hurt him, but he could express his desire to forgive them—and for God to forgive them. Jesus emptied his heart and soul, letting go of every painful word and act against him. Having carefully tended his relationship with God throughout his life, he continued to tend that relationship, and his soul, by offering forgiveness. Soon he released even life itself to God: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).