

Healing Power of Forgiveness

by Father Jim McManus cssr

This morning we want to think about forgiveness – forgiveness which is the God given way of protecting our inner peace and maintaining our self-esteem. Even in the face of the greatest injustice. Recently we had two very notable examples of forgiveness and sadly of un-forgiveness. When that policeman was tragically stabbed to death a few weeks ago, his father, Mr. Noyce was interviewed on television and he told the whole nation that he was praying for the killer; that he had forgiven the killer of his son and that he was not looking for any kind of vengeance. A few months ago when Myra Hendley died we got a very different message to the nation from the popular press as it is called, many of the headlines were consigning Myra Hendley to Hell and indeed at her funeral one lady held up a placard with the message “Rot in Hell”! A very sad commentary on the way she was coping with what was indeed a terrible crime committed thirty or forty years ago.

Forgiveness is the heart of the Gospel:

Forgiveness is the heart of the Gospel. The heart of the Christian Gospel and it is very difficult to see how people who do believe in the Gospel of Christ can reconcile un-forgiveness with believing in Christ and yet we know that that does happen and can happen to us too – in our own life we can try to hold on to resentments and to bitterness, to the desire to get our own back and at the same time try to live the Gospel of Christ. Gregory Jones who has written a wonderful book on forgiveness some time ago said, says, “those who are forgiven by Jesus are called to embody that forgiven-ness in the new life signified by communion with Jesus and that of the other disciples – indeed – that forgiven-ness calls believers to live penitent lives and seek to reconstruct human relationships in the service of holiness of heart and life.”

Gift of God and a Human Process:

The power to reconstruct, the power to give a new shape and a new direction to one’s life when one has been badly hurt – comes through forgiveness. Forgiveness is primarily a theological concept – a religious concept and I suppose that is why for such a long time the world of psychology left forgiveness to the religious people, to the preachers, to the ministers, the theologians. They never looked at forgiveness – now thank God they are beginning to pay attention to the process of forgiveness – because forgiveness is not just a **gift of God** it is also a **human process**. And a human process that involves a great variety of human emotions. And so certainly a subject that psychology can teach us a great deal about as they examine the process, how does this human process of forgiving unfold? Where does it become stuck and how does it become unstuck. We can learn a great deal from what psychologists today are writing about forgiveness.

We are a forgiven, forgiving people:

We are a forgiven, forgiving people – that is the very definition of the Church. If we are forgiven then we in turn forgive. **We can not reconcile being forgiven and being unforgiving.** Of course Christ built that in to his prayer didn't he; "forgive us as we forgive them!" There is no real leeway there at all – we are either forgiving or we are unforgiving. It is clear – a clear sharp contrast. Forgiveness of course originates in God because that is the very nature of God – to be forgiving. And **God forgives us – long before we repent.** Our repentance doesn't merit God's forgiveness. Our repentance is the means through which we receive it. Through repentance we don't merit forgiveness but through repentance we are open – we open ourselves to receive the gift of forgiveness. And once given that gift of forgiveness is to be shared and so the Church is the community that receives the forgiveness of God and shares that forgiveness that it has received with everyone. Nobody is excluded from the forgiveness that we receive in our own hearts. If someone is excluded then we ourselves have not opened to the gift of forgiveness.

Human Process:

As well as being the gift of God and the heart of the Gospel – forgiveness of course, is a human process. And it is at this stage of the human process that most people have difficulties. The example that I gave of Mr. Noyce being able to come on television and say, "I have forgiven the person who killed my son!" That of course is an outstanding witness of forgiveness. Mr. Noyce of course is from a very believing family – a Baptist family – truly people who are living the life of forgiveness and therefore the most natural thing in the world for a devote believer is to do what Christ does – to forgive. But normally it is going to **take some time to arrive at that** – for the average person it will be a **struggle** – we may have to go through all kinds of – anger and bitterness and seeking vengeance and so on. And so it is this side of **the process of forgiveness** that I want to look at this morning. Whenever I discuss forgiveness with any group – normally there is quite a heated disagreement about what is involved in forgiveness and I have met people, very good people – often in this very conference room that would claim that they – that there are certain people that they would not forgive.

I remember once on a priests retreat I had been speaking about forgiveness and one man said with great certainty and conviction that God may well forgive this person but he never will. He was referring at the time to a world leader at the time – whom he blamed for a lot of misery in the people that he was working for. And while he did not consign that world leader to Hell – but he wasn't going to forgive him and we had a long discussion about that. On the same retreat we had a long discussion about – what do you do about someone who has killed a lot of people. There is a strong conviction that only the dead can forgive – only the person who has been injured can forgive. And so – the holocaust victims – millions of them – they're not now in a position where they can forgive and so forgiveness is not possible in that situation – that is an argument that I have heard before. So there is quite a

bit of disagreement among Christians when it comes to the point of how do we understand forgiveness and how does it come into operation.

Let's look first of all at a definition of forgiveness – these two definitions that I want to put up on the overhead now are from two psychologists not from a religious perspectives. The first definition there is from a chap called Jampolsky who has published a wonderful little book – the title is – “Forgiveness; the greatest healer!” he says,

“From the perspective of love and spirit, forgiveness is willingness to let go of the hurtful past. It is the decision to no longer suffer – to heal your heart and soul –it is the choice to no longer find value in hatred or anger – and it is the letting go of the desire to hurt others or ourselves because of something that is already in the past. It is willingness to open our eyes to the light in other people rather to judge and condemn them.”

And so in that view forgiveness is – is very much a decision about what I want for myself. How am I going to cope myself with the hurt and the pain in my own heart. And Jampolsky says that – forgiveness really is the decision to no longer suffer – the decision to heal your heart. The only thing that can heal the broken heart is forgiveness. That of course becomes a discovery – we don't logically arrive at that when we are hurt. It may take us some time before we get the insight that carrying around bitterness or resentment or the desire for vengeance – that is simply not good for one's self. Of course it does no harm at all to the other. Carrying a resentment against somebody does not hurt the person you are resenting but it certainly does harm you.

The other definition that I want to look at is from Robert Enright – I mentioned him the other day, Robert Enright, Professor of Psychology at Wisconsin University – he began a lot of this movement in forgiveness by trying to have forgiveness and a seminar on forgiveness accepted – as an academic subject. Worthy of serious study and initially he got no support at all from his university. For several years he was on his own – in fact – he told me that his only funding for what he was trying to do came from a name-sake – my name sake, Jim McManus – from Florida – this wealthy Jim McManus from Florida saw the need for a serious study of forgiveness and so has funded Enright's Institute. Now, Enright's Institute is titled an International Institute of Forgiveness – I came across it once when I was on the internet looking for new things on forgiveness. He now is promoting workshops on forgiveness in all the trouble places of the world – to try to bring to people an understanding that the only way really – to ultimate heal a conflict is by working for forgiveness.

It is not a message of course that politicians are noted for but sadly too it is not a message that Christian Churches are noted for. We have a long way to go in taking up again what again is the heart of the Gospel – well this is Enright's definition and this definition has been

worked at he says – for over the past 14 years – people arriving at his Institute from whatever background they have come from have all contributed in some way or other to arrive at a definition that could be acceptable to people of all faiths or none.

He says, “Forgiveness is a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, negative judgement and indifferent behaviour towards one who has unjustly injured us while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love towards him or her.”

So the same focus – it is a **decision** – it is a willingness to give up something that you have a right to – and if you are badly hurt – you have a right, every right to be angry, you have a right to resent. Then you have to decide what to do with that. In forgiveness the decision is to give it up – not to hold on to this right – cause this right is not going to do you any good at all. People who have a problem with forgiveness – normally have a problem with what they think forgiveness is. There can be a very bad misunderstanding about forgiveness. So for that forgiveness is for instance excusing or tolerating.

Forgiveness if NOT:

So let’s first of all look at what forgiveness is NOT. Forgiveness is **not simply a moral obligation**. But rather it is **an inalienable right**. People when they are badly hurt – if they are told “now you must forgive” – of course they will receive that as a moral obligation coming at them in their pain from without. And if they are told to do that – of course – they are going to resent that and resist it. It is bad enough to be hurt – they will say - and now you expect me now to forgive. Whereas I think we have to try to see that far from being a moral obligation imposed from without – **forgiveness is my greatest asset. It is my right; my inalienable right – because it is the only means through which I can heal my own heart.** There is no other means – I can try all kinds of other medications and distractions to be freed of the pain in my heart but it won’t work. The only thing that heals the heart is forgiveness – and then because it is my inalienable right, I will allow nobody to rob me of that right – even if the person who has hurt me defiantly insists that he will do it again at every opportunity. I will not allow him to rob me of my inalienable right to forgive. It is bad enough to be hurt – it is twice as bad to be robbed of the means of dealing with the hurt; which is forgiveness.

Another big understanding is that forgiveness is **condoning** – of course we should never and can never condone the wrong, we have to name wrong. It would be wrong in itself to condone what is wrong. Nor is forgiveness **excusing**. If somebody has done something that is unjust – then we don’t seek for a way of excusing the wrong. When you think about it – excusing is the very opposite of forgiving rather is the very opposite of excusing. For example if you all had to arrive here for this week at great inconvenience maybe and expense to yourselves and I did not turn up to give the week because I was in hospital – I would not need your forgiveness. Why – because I had a perfect excuse. If I am excusable

then forgiveness does not enter into the picture – but if you all had arrived here and I did not turn up because I thought “I’m down in the midlands and I think I’ll go on down to Wales and drive around there and see what is on around there and Morris will take care of the group!” then of course I’ll need forgiveness. Why – because I had no excuse. Notice it is only when there is no excuse that forgiveness comes into operation. If you have an excuse you are excusable – but also notice that if you say you forgive somebody you are also saying, “I forgive you because I blame you!” If you don’t blame somebody for doing you wrong you can’t forgive them. So – in **the very heart of the act of forgiving is the recognition of someone having wronged you.** There is an implied blame, “I’m blaming this person – now therefore I’m going to forgive this person.”

Another great misunderstanding is that forgiveness is **tolerating**. Tolerating the evil – forgiveness does not turn you into a door mat for anybody. In fact – forgiveness is going to give you the energy to stand up to evil – not to go under. Nor is forgiveness **forgetting**. Forgive and forget is NOT a maxim of Christian wisdom. Forgive and remember in a new way – that the maxim of Christian wisdom; once we forgive we can **remember in a new way** – but we don’t try to forgive and forget. Of course if somebody does you a great wrong you can never forget it. How you remember it is the important thing. You can either remember it with resentment or bitterness or you can remember it with acceptance.

Nor is forgiveness reconciliation. There is a great confusion here that you often hear people say “Oh well I’m quite prepared to forgive him but he does not want to have anything to do with me.” My forgiveness of the enemy does NOT depend on the enemies willingness to be reconciled with me. Notice what would happen if my forgiveness depended upon the other person’s willingness to receive it – if that was the case then I would hand over all my inner power of forgiveness to the enemy. He could then manipulate my exercise of forgiveness – if he wanted to receive it – then I could forgive – if he did not want to receive it – I could not forgive. But of course forgiveness is not reconciliation. Reconciliation is what happens between two people – forgiveness is what I do myself. Without necessarily any form of reconciliation happening. Jesus said, “love your enemy” - he did not say invite your enemy back home for tea! He said love your enemy and keep on loving your enemy – even though he remains your enemy.

Nor is forgiveness **letting the offender off the hook**. Letting him off scott free – again that is often the reason why some people are reluctant to forgive. They think, “of well, he has got away with it!” And – there is a certain degree of satisfaction in holding on to a resentment – if there wasn’t we would not be doing it – so there is a certain degree of satisfaction in holding on to a resentment – but it is a very pale substitute for the real thing which is forgiveness – that is where the true peace is found. Forgiveness is then not letting the other person off the hook – in fact – forgiveness is getting ME off the hook. I have been impaled on this person’s hook and until I forgive I’m still on that hook.

Nor is forgiveness begging pardon. When Pope John Paul went to Regina Coeli prison in Rome the Christmas day the attempt on this life by Ali Agca – he forgave Ali Agca – personally. But he did not ask for his release. Ali Agca stayed in prison – in fact the only heart that can truly seek justice is the heart that forgives. If the heart has not forgiven it is not really seeking justice; it is out for vengeance. And that is very notable that people who have truly forgiven can become the great pursuers of justice and great advocates of justice.

Nor is forgiveness weakness. In our society – unfortunately we often take it as great weakness if we forgive the enemy where as in fact – we know that forgiveness takes great strength. Anyone who saw Mr. Noyce on television – saw a strong man. He was not going to allow the integrity of his own life to be destroyed by what that killer did. So that is what forgiveness is NOT.

Forgiveness then is what Enright or Jampolsky says, “Forgiveness is a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment negative judgement and indifferent behaviour.” Of course when you are hurt you have a right – a right to feel hurt and a part of feeling hurt is resentment; so you have a right to feel that. But the decision to forgive involves the decision to let go of that; a willingness to let go of that. Now at times we may have to work at that for a long time. Forgiveness just does not happen like that – it may take us weeks and months of prayer before we can arrive at a situation where now we can say in our heart, “Now we have forgiven the person who has wronged us!”

Stages of Forgiveness:

So first of all let us review very briefly some of the stages that we all go through when something bad happens, some horrible injustice happens.

The first stage is the **stage of denial**. If a dear friend has turned on you and betrayed you and done something very unjust – well then the easiest way to cope with it initially is to deny that it happened. And maybe we live in that stage of denial for some time. It is a way of minimising the impact of what has happened. Some others believe that everyone who has been hurt spends some time in the denial stage. It is way of soothing the shock of the initial hurt.

We come through that denial stage and we enter into a curious **stage which is self blame**. We begin to say well, “if only I had not said that” or “if only I had not done that” or “if only I had left a half an hour earlier” or “if only I had not gone into work that day!” I’m sure you all have recognised in your heart the “if only”. What do you do when you are saying “if only”? You are really taking some of the responsibility yourself for the harm that has happened as if in some way you or other you could have avoided it. That is why they say – we often go in for the self blame because self blame implies that I could have done something to prevent

this - and that then maybe gives me some confidence then in the future – I can do something to avoid this.

The next **stage is the victim stage**. When we come out of the denial and we no longer are going to take blame ourselves – then we recognise then that this really did happen to me. That someone actually did hurt me. And that he or she intended to do it that it wasn't an accident – it was deliberate. The victim stage at times is not a very pretty stage for the people around you. Because we can then be – there is no pain like my pain – we can become very focussed on our pain and live as if no one else had ever suffered in this world apart from ourselves. So in this stage we begin to wallow in the pain, even boast about how our lives have been destroyed. And so people can pass from being victimised – and that what is what has happened – the person has been victimised – they can pass from being victimised to being a victim. They can whine and moan and groan and fill the room with negative energy – it is not a very pleasant stage to be in but it is very important to note that if we are badly hurt – the chances are that we all go through this stage. And it can be a healing stage; part of the process.

Then we come into **the indignation stage**. This is where there can be a lot of energy around. I realise now that I have been hurt. Now my anger gets up – my good anger gets up. And my good anger is going to try to cope with this – I'm not going to lay down under this. That is the stage where a lot of decision about what I'm going to do takes place. And this prepares us then to come into **the survivor stage** – where one realises that – yes – they've tried to do me down but I'm still here. A recognition that even though it was terrible and awful it did not destroy my life – and I'm certainly going to allow it to destroy my life. In the survivor stage you become an actor again instead of a reactor! You become a player again in the game of life rather than a spectator – watching from the sidelines while life passes you by.

And then finally we enter into **the integration stage** where – the person now can calmly accept that this is part of my life experience – I am accepting it totally. C S Lewis in a letter to Malcolm said, "Last week when at prayer I suddenly discovered or felt as if I had – that I had forgiven someone that I had been trying to forgive for over thirty years!" You wake up one morning and you discover that you have forgiven. People say I think that – **you forgive – when your heart is ready to be healed**. In fact – the forgiveness that you extend comes from the healed heart. Until the heart is healed it is going to be impossible for you to extend the forgiveness.

A few little steps:

A few little steps now that are helpful when you are working on some issue of forgiveness in your own life. First of all – it is important to have **time to think**. Time to focus on what actually happened. Many people react to what did not happen – to what they thought happened. And very often what you think happened did not happen at all. So it is important

that we have time to think about what actually did happen and then **to evaluate that**. Was it an accident? Was it a pattern, a pattern of behaviour? One off incident? Or a repeated pattern? Was it a misunderstanding?

Then time to **talk with a friend**. If someone has wronged you in some way – very often it is not possible to arrive at a peaceful acceptance and forgiveness without really hearing yourself talk the pain through with a friend. It is not that the friend is going to tell you what to do – it is that **when you talk to a friend you begin to hear in yourself what you should be doing**. Then – **time to feel** – time to be alone with yourself – to name how you feel. Very often – when we have negative feeling we don't like to mention our negative feelings to God. So if you feel like killing somebody you don't like saying to God "I feel like killing that person!" And yet that is a very important feeling to mention to God. A time to get in touch with all of your feelings – all your hurt feelings. And then – the final step – **tell God how you feel; hurt, hate, resentment and so on. And seek the grace of forgiveness**.

People who – go through the process of trying to forgive will, of course always receive the grace to forgive – now like C S Lewis – it may take a person a long time to really begin to realise, "Yes, I have forgiven that person!" Then when we feel that we have forgiven we can begin to do then – a helpful exercise which is known as **reframing**. We can try to see the person in the context of his own life because if he has done me wrong – apart from the pain he has caused me there are circumstances in his own life which may well explain to some extent why he is the way he is – towards me. So as well as forgiving I begin to get – maybe a new way of seeing him. So this person has been nasty and rude to me – but then he grew up in that kind of an atmosphere. So I can – I stop seeing him just as a person who has been rude and nasty to me and begin to see him as a victim himself of rudeness and nasty-ness. That is maybe the situation that he grew up in. So we can reframe the person – as it were – and get a new picture – my original picture of him is simply as the nasty person who has been unjust to me- then through the healing process of forgiveness I can reframe him – and see him in a different light.

So **forgiveness** as Jampolsky said **is the greatest healer** and – we would be surrendering one of our greatest powers to heal our own heart if we allow somebody to rob us of the power to forgive. In fact – carrying resentment and bitterness and things like that in our own heart – can only do us a lot of harm.

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