

## **Fed by Forgiveness**

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Of all the things that Jesus asked people to do forgiveness has to be the hardest! Just ask Peter: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. What do you think Jesus meant by that? Forgiveness is a very broad subject that needs to be addressed situation by situation; so let’s bring our conversation back to the context of Jesus’ words. He’s not talking in this instance about forgiving someone who has abused or raped or murdered another. He is addressing the realities of intentional faith communities.

Living together in communities of shared values has its points of wonder and enrichment. It also has its share of disappointments and misunderstandings. In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer seeks to awaken us to the harsh realities of intentional living His language is non-inclusive but listen to it as a brother and sister and know he’s writing about all of us.

“The serious Christian,” Bonhoeffer writes, “set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves.”

“By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world. He does not abandon us to those rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over us like a dream. Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves this dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”

“The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren. He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash.”

Our community is not by any stretch of the imagination going to smash, in Bonhoeffer’s words, but I suspect that many of you have been in communities that have found themselves on the edge and perhaps one or two have fallen over and died. Forgiveness like love can be a harsh and dreadful thing, because it gets under our skin and demands us to take responsibility for our own feelings and our own failings. Have you ever known yourself to forgive someone 77 times? Let’s face it.... once is difficult enough, twice impossible, the third time?

We live in a “three strikes your out” culture where forgiveness is a rare commodity. Our prison system like our current immigration system forgets that in baseball, our so-called great American past time, there is always a next inning, another time at bat, another three strikes option waiting to be played. In the church, the notion of three strikes and your out has no place. But some people don’t even go that far. An act of omission, a perceived slight, a wrong assumption has them out the door. What Jesus is advocating when it comes to forgiveness is not an easy thing; but a necessary thing.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” My experience confirms this, as a person and as a pastor. Those who can’t forgive someone in the church usually walk away in anger and spend the rest of their lives spitting their anger out in all the wrong places. The teachings of Jesus challenge us to become strong, not tough. They ask us to move beyond our wishful thinking and live the hard realities of community life.

Practicing forgiveness benefits the community and the one who forgives. The community moves on just as the individual moves on from strength to strength. Un-forgiveness robs both individual and community of critical life-energy. While forgiveness requires a faith open to the present moment, un-forgiveness clings to the past and nurses old wounds—wounds that may have nothing to do with the present moment.

When we practice forgiveness we become responsible for the love of God and that love rule in our hearts. Jesus knew in his heart, soul, mind, and strength—in his entire body/spirit that forgiveness is the very nature of God. That’s why he demanded we pay attention to the present moment and practice forgiveness over and over and over again.

Forgiveness requires a transformation of vision- it asks us to see the world differently, to have the strength to step beyond our fears and live in compassion. When we do that we heal ourselves from the inside out. Our breath becomes less shallow, our veins and arteries resume their natural function and our blood pressure returns to normal—neither too low or too high. Our bodies reap the benefits of well-being and are no longer imprisoned by past grudges and festering wounds.

Forgiving doesn’t mean forgetting just like forgetting doesn’t equate with forgiving. Forgiving frees us from the power of another’s actions, and therein lays its grace. We are free to be ourselves and to rest in God’s refreshing grace. Forgiveness requires faith in a loving God, not a judgmental God. That’s where this communion table comes into play. We do not come to this table seeking God’s forgiveness for our sins, because in truth God forgives us each and every moment. We come to this table to be reminded that forgiveness is an act of faith, and an act of grace. Whenever we open ourselves to God’s transforming love, love changes us for the better.

We see each other more clearly.

We accept each other as being loved by God.

We recognize that we are as prone to failure as the person who has failed us.

Without this inner seeing of the heart, genuine community remains a dream not a reality. In the Iona community I learned this prayer, “Living God, May we not fail you; Living God may we not fail one another.”

I am well aware that in the past few weeks because of my responsibilities in the New Sanctuary movement it may appear to more than one of you that I have not been there for you as a pastor. I know without a word being spoken between us that you have been forgiving me and I am grateful for your blessings.

Every day I find myself stretched in ways I had not imagined before. If I have failed any of you, I am deeply sorry, and ask your forgiveness. Likewise, if ever you think you have failed me, know that you have my forgiveness. I serve at this table through your generosity and God’s. Be assured, I never take such generosity for granted. May forgiveness be with us all. Amen.