

## Practicing Forgiveness

There are certain practices that lie at the heart of our life with God and they mark the elements that are integral to living an authentic Christian life.

When we do the work of allowing these practices to shape our lives, we are transformed, individually and communally, ever more fully into the image of God which was imprinted on our souls at creation; these practices form us into true disciples of Jesus. They can shape our actions and responses in the minutiae of our lives and relationships as well as in those global events of devastation and destruction that often leave us speechless in horror and pain.

Forgiveness is at the heart of our life with God and a central practice of a faithful life.

Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is very spare and succinct. It reads:

*Father, hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Give us each day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone  
indebted to us.*

When the disciples wanted to understand Jesus' intimacy with God, whom he called "Abba" or "Father" he taught them what we call the Lord's Prayer. "The prayer covers the basics." After praising God and praying for God's justice and mercy to happen on earth as in heaven, the prayer petitions God for what the human creature needs the most.

People need food, clothing, and shelter to survive. To follow in the way of Jesus, in the way of deep intimacy with God, we need food, clothing, shelter, *and forgiveness*. For followers of Jesus, forgiveness gets equal billing with food and protection! The question we are left with is why?<sup>[1]</sup>

"Without forgiveness, the disciples risk killing themselves and others in a cycle of unending (physical and emotional) violence. Forgiveness enables the disciples to steer a middle course between self-hatred and hatred of others, between self-destruction and annihilation of everyone else."<sup>[2]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> *A World According to God: Practices for Putting Faith at the Center of Your Life*, Jossey-Bass, 2004, Page 93.

<sup>[2]</sup> *Ibid.* Words in parentheses mine.

Without forgiveness the disciples would travel an isolated journey “alienated from others by slights and petty grievances.” In this powerful prayer it is this life-giving and life-restoring petition, this practice of forgiveness that sends us out again and again on the path of reconciliation.<sup>[3]</sup> Giving and/or receiving forgiveness is quite possibly the hardest thing that Jesus ever asked us to do.

As Fred Buechner says, “To forgive somebody is to say one way or another ‘You have done something and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you’ve done, and though we may both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it come between us.’ And of course to accept forgiveness means that *you* have done the unspeakable thing and thus both parties have to swallow the same thing, their pride.”<sup>[4]</sup>

From the horror of terrorism or abusive relationships all the way down to the insidious grudges carried for years about someone who upset you at church over the way you placed the candles on the altar, forgiveness is the only way out of bondage into freedom; it is the way from death to life. And sometimes, it is important to note, we must forgive without reconciliation; we must never put ourselves in harm’s way from someone who is physically and emotionally abusive. But the sweet, healing power of forgiveness can still grant us new life; forgiveness can take the human heart one minute or 30+ years to forgive, God knows it requires time.

We are not forced to move to quickly and risk a forgiveness that is a shadow of the real thing. And no matter what some religious types will tell you, God’s forgiveness of us is not dependent on our ability to forgive, God’s grace is never conditional. But if we are unable to give or receive forgiveness, chances are certain that we will be unable to receive this generous grace of God’s as well—we will reject it outright. What foolishness that we continually reject such a treasure as God’s grace.

The practice of forgiveness takes us on a lifelong journey. Make no mistake; forgiveness is a gift, a hard gift, but a gift beyond measure. If you are experiencing the need to give or receive this gift, but find yourself stuck I hope you will come and see me to talk about it. We begin our Lenten journey is just two weeks and Lent is a perfect time to walk into the

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<sup>[3]</sup>Ibid. My paraphrase.

<sup>[4]</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker’s ABC*, Harper San Francisco, 1973, 1993, page 33.

shadows and bring our new pain or old pain out into the loving, healing light of Christ.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+