

FORGIVENESS OVERVIEW

How essential is the idea and practice of forgiveness to human society? (Although sounding too trite to mention, consider how there would be no need of forgiveness in a perfect world.)

Thinking about the ideal can help us begin consideration of this important topic. First, of all what is forgiveness?

The Encarta World English Dictionary defines forgiveness as “the act of pardoning somebody for a mistake or wrongdoing.”

(1) Forgive: stop being angry or resenting somebody or somebody’s behavior, (2) pardon: to excuse somebody for a mistake, misunderstanding, wrongdoing or inappropriateness, (3) cancel obligation... such as a debt.

Admitting a world that is not perfect but singing of a world that could make amends, the poet Rudyard Kipling prays:

Teach us delight in simple things,
And mirth that has no bitter springs;
Forgiveness free of evil done,
And love to all men ‘neath the sun.

But we live in a world not simple and in situations devoid of mirth. The poet John Dryden suggests:

Forgiveness to the injured does belong;
But they ne’er pardon, who have done the wrong.

Relationships, marriages, families, communities and nations cannot exist without forgiveness. A marriage where one or both cannot say, “I love you” and “I’m sorry” is in trouble. The world today is racked by conflicts fired by century-old wounds. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said the trouble with “an eye for an eye” is that it leaves everybody blind.

Where is the forgiveness cycle to begin when all feel hurt? Can the crafty manipulate apologies? Are apologies enough, and what makes a genuine apology or confession? Must victims of horrendous deeds extend forgiveness—and how soon? These are difficult questions. We live in a world of quick and superficial apologies without admission of guilt; our sense is that many just want to get the embarrassing affair behind them and “get on with it.” They are sorry for getting caught, or for the consequences, without taking personal responsibility.

Those who have been sexually abused as children or raped in adulthood, need time to come to grips with the magnitude of their hurt and anger, to express these, and then, in their own time, move on to the possibility of forgiveness and release. The perpetrator of a rape or sexual abuse, for instance, does not have the right, to begin with, to ask forgiveness. Power must be given back to the victim to decide the timing. Too quick forgiveness can cheapen the gravity of a terrific wrong and the quality of grace.

If violence and wrongdoing involve the triad of Perpetrator, Victim, and By-stander, the oppression is not just individual but corporate, and has lasted over long periods of time, all parties may need to express their guilt, shame, hurt and anger before moving toward confession and to forgiveness. This is what reconciliation is about. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission developed as a means of healing South Africa's terrible wounds following apartheid, developed by Bishop Desmond Tutu and others, is a fine historical example (though certainly not perfect) of such systemic reconciliation.

The Christian faith tradition has much to say about forgiveness. It remembers the words of Jesus Christ on the Cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." It remembers Jesus urging his disciples to forgive their neighbors again and again, "seventy times seven." And the "Our Father" or Lord's Prayer has the challenging and sometimes seemingly impossible words: "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

The issue of forgiveness presents us with many challenges to be explored from different stories and perspectives.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What stands as the most difficult offer of forgiveness you've ever made—or are thinking you need to make?
2. Did you ever find it very difficult to ask someone for forgiveness?
3. How would you estimate the benefits of apology or confession and forgiveness?
4. What happens to someone who can't offer forgiveness? When someone refuses to apologize for a wrong?
5. Do human groups every need to apologize or forgive one another? What example might you give of this? How is corporate confession and forgiveness much more difficult than that between individuals?

IMPLICATIONS

1. "To err is human, to forgive divine." This well-known saying from Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Criticism" suggests that human mistakes and wrongs are inevitable and that we need the divine quality of forgiveness to make our world livable.
2. Human life has always needed the chance to apologize and forgive. Different cultures do this in different ways. We must examine the quality of apology and forgiveness in contemporary life.
3. Faith communities hold up a higher standard of confession and forgiveness worthy of discussion—and a lesson to the world at large.

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