

Clergy Column

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Forgiveness is giving up hope that the past will get better. I am often asked about forgiveness. I hear, “How can I forgive?” and “Am I forgivable?” The second comes of great suffering, but is easy to answer: Yes! Yes, you are forgivable! No matter how heinous your wrong, you are forgiven. In fact, only the noncondonable *can* be forgiven, because nothing else needs it. The answer is easily given, but can be uneasily accepted. My heart breaks for those who believe themselves unforgivable, and who cannot forgive themselves. I can only try to reassure them of God’s forgiveness, and that I forgive them, even if I wasn’t involved. The words “I forgive you” are powerful, well-destroying words.

The first question posed above, though, is the tough one: “How can I forgive?” Or “Should I forgive?” Ours is a punitive and retributive culture that leaves so little (if any) room for public-level forgiveness that practicing it at a personal level is difficult, or seen as a weakness. But even though we don’t see society model forgiveness, we Christians are called to it. It might even be our greatest discipline. Imagine forgiveness modeled on a societal level. If we are to be a Christian nation, as some so loudly proclaim nowadays, let us be the kind that lives Christ’s commandments. Imagine our public halls with great plaques that read “Love your neighbor as yourself!”, “Blessed are the poor and the meek!” and “Forgive seven times seventy times!” A people who see the Divine in one another and therefore refuse to sit idly and allow the evils of hunger, homelessness, or inadequate healthcare. A people who so love their neighbor that punishment and vengeance are put aside in favor of mercy and forgiveness. Imagine our nation forgiving others that wrong us, and which confesses to and seeks forgiveness from those we wrong. Forgiveness is important for our health, corporately and individually. Grudges, hate, and anger cost us energy we could use more healthily. Through forgiveness, we let go of the bad stuff, making room for God’s good stuff. But forgiveness is not always easy. In fact, I can think of little that Jesus asks us to do that is not very difficult. To those who come to me who are finding forgiveness difficult, I offer a few suggestions. Of course we explore their hurt and shame, but I ask them, “Why continue to give that person power over you?” I like to teach a prayer that goes, “God, I know I should forgive so-and-so but I’m not ready; so I leave it to you, and I’ll join you when I am ready”. I remind them that forgiveness is free, without demanding an apology or restitution or retribution. I hope reconciliation can follow, but that is not always possible. Letting go is an act of grace, and a joining with God in the miracle of forgiveness. Lastly, I remind them forgiveness comes with forgetting, leaving evil nothing left to latch onto so its only option is to disappear into nothingness. This does not mean we allow a pedophile back with children, or insist a woman return to her abusive husband, but that we end the cycle of pain and take power away from evil.

The words “I forgive you” have healing power. Try them instead of debasing someone who offends, and see what happens. You might be surprised how they transform the offender, and yourself. Six years ago this Tuesday, as I walked from the ruins of the World Trade Center, I paused and forgave the people who perpetrated such great evil. Letting go was a moment of

spiritual healing. To acknowledge that their destiny was not my responsibility, but God's, was a great relief. I was compelled to transform my rage from unhealthy self-focus, to the energy to strive for a world in which my brothers and sisters have better options than resorting to evil. It was a moment to admit that my past was not going to get better, and to instead rise from the ashes of past suffering into a future of present hope.

If you need to forgive or be forgiven, I invite to our community Day of Forgiveness and Rebirth in Phoenix Park on Tuesday, Sept. 11. The event has been organized by members of concerned communities around Eau Claire. Various intergenerational activities will begin at 6:30 p.m., with a 45 minute community observance held in the Labyrinth Amphitheater at 7:00. Vietnam veteran Mike Boehm, who has been active in reconciliation work following the MyLai Massacre, will be the central speaker. I invite you to come and take advantage of those powerful words, "I forgive you".