

To Err is Human; To Forgive...?

BY THOMAS G. LONG

The New Testament is always calling us to do what we cannot do. No, we ourselves cannot forgive, but as we strive to forgive we are given God's forgiveness as a gift. We are not called to create forgiveness; that is beyond us. We are called instead to participate in a forgiveness given to us as a gift.

Ephesians 4:25-32

Many years ago I was standing at the circulation desk of the library at the seminary where I taught when a friend who works as a pastoral counselor approached carrying a heavy stack of books. He placed them on the desk and began filling out checkout cards.

"What are you doing with all those books?" I asked.

"Research," he said.

"What are you working on?"

"Forgiveness," he replied. "I'm working on forgiveness."

"*Forgiveness?* What are you trying to find out?"

He thought for a moment, and then he said, "I guess I'm trying to find out if forgiveness really exists or not. You know, I don't really see very much of it in my work."

This exchange was, admittedly, somewhat unsettling. What did he mean about "trying to find out if forgiveness really *exists* or not"? Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian faith. "Father, forgive them," Jesus prayed from the cross. "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," affirms

the ancient baptismal creed. And as the writer of Ephesians urges us, “Forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.” If forgiveness does not exist, then what about the gospel, what about the Christian faith? But here was a faithful minister, a good pastoral counselor, a person who spends his days talking with people in crisis, many of whom probably need forgiveness more than anything else in the world, and he wonders before God and everybody else in the seminary library if forgiveness really exists or not.

We have to acknowledge that my pastoral counselor friend has a point. If we are honest, we have to admit that we do not see much forgiveness either, not real forgiveness. Forgiveness in the New Testament sense is not a superficial event. It is not merely a willingness to “let bygones be bygones” or to throw up one’s hands with an “Ah, forget it, life must go on” attitude. In the New Testament, forgiveness is about making what is tragically broken right again. Forgiveness is about a deep healing, a thorough repair of broken relationships, a removal of the poison that destroys love and harmony, a restoration of wholeness and open trust. Forgiveness is saying with utter truthfulness, “The wrong is now righted. I no longer count this against you.”

So where do we see real forgiveness in our world? In the Middle East, we may see an occasional cease-fire or treaty, but forgiveness? In Kosovo, in Rwanda, in Afghanistan, among embittered races and classes, between warring religious groups, bad blood and ancient wrongs endure despite yearnings for peace. The Pope apologizes for the holocaust, the Southern Baptists apologize for slavery, but who could claim that these old and outrageous wounds are now fully healed and the sweetness of trust restored? Like my counselor friend, we don’t see much real forgiveness.

Even in the smaller, one-to-one personal relationships, where forgiveness could be in closer reach, we see precious little genuine, deep forgiveness. Some time ago, I was driving home from work early one afternoon and traveling down a six-lane city thoroughfare, the kind of street every big city has, one thronged with constant traffic and lined with taco stands, hamburger joints, used car lots, and convenience stores. The light at an intersection turned red, and my line of traffic stopped. A knot of teenagers who had just finished the day at a nearby high school started into the crosswalk in front of us. They were in a good mood, cutting up, laughing, and flirting with each other. One girl carried a big boom box radio on her shoulder with rock music blasting out at full volume. You couldn’t miss them.

However, the woman in the pickup truck making a left turn evidently did not see them, because she slammed into the girl carrying the radio with fearsome force. The girl was knocked across the road, her radio

bouncing over the pavement and shattering into jagged pieces. Several of us jumped from our cars and ran over to the girl, who fortunately seemed more bruised and scared than seriously injured. She asked us to call her mother and, between sobs, managed to choke out the phone number. Somebody ran to a pay phone and called the police and also the girl's mother.

The police came quickly, and about ten minutes later another car screeched up to the scene. Out stepped the girl's mother, who ran over to her still weeping daughter, got down on the pavement and held her daughter tightly, stroking her hair and cradling her head in her arms. Soon the woman who had been driving the pickup truck finished speaking to the police, came over to the mother and daughter, and the best way I know to describe what happened next is that the woman stood there and begged for forgiveness. "I am very, very sorry," she said, her lips trembling with fear and grief. "I did not see you. Honest to God, I did not see you. I am so sorry. I am so sorry, I am so sorry."

The mother looked toward the woman, her face tightened in rage. "Our lawyer will be in touch," she said, practically spitting as she spoke.

"I'm trying to find out," my friend said, "if forgiveness really exists or not. You know, I don't really see very much of it."

It is not just over the broad landscape of larger society or in the lives of other people that forgiveness is rare. If we are truthful with ourselves, we have to admit that forgiveness is rare in our own personal experience as well. I teach homiletics, the art of preaching, and one day I walked into my beginning preaching class and told them to prepare to take a test. They were

not expecting this and looked at me apprehensively. "I am not going to grade this test," I reassured them, "but it will be an important test nonetheless." I went on to explain that the test would involve my reading a list of theological words, big doctrinal concepts, and that their job would be to write a paragraph for each word describing how they personally had experienced these concepts. "After all," I said, "good preaching involves

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taking big, sometimes abstract theological ideas and showing how they are flesh and blood realities. So, let's see if you can do this with your own flesh and blood."

I began with the list. "The first theological word is 'hope'." They all started writing. They knew about hope. They wrote about hoping for babies to be born, standing at bedside and praying hopefully for healing, standing at graveside and hoping for joy to rise from sorrow. About hope they knew much.

"The second word," I said, "is 'faith'," and again the pens moved. They had stepped out in faith to come to seminary, walked in faith out of secure careers to become ministers, and faithfully trusted the inner voice that spoke a call to serve. They knew about faith.

I moved down the list. "The third word is 'forgiveness'." The pens stopped writing. When the students did write, they wrote about experiences that were, by their own admission, small, even trivial. A mother's forgiving words over a broken vase, a high school teacher who did not count a bad grade against them, a teammate who said "Don't worry about it" over a missed final shot, that sort of thing. They were preparing to preach the gospel, but one of the central claims of the gospel, the promise of deep, healing forgiveness, was something they had not experienced for themselves. Surely there were in their lives places where forgiveness was needed, possible environments for forgiveness to grow and to flower—broken relationships with parents, pain with a spouse, trouble with children—but they were silent about these arenas. No memory of deep down forgiveness could be found.

"Forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven you," commands the writer of Ephesians. "I'm trying to find out if forgiveness really exists or not," said the pastoral counselor.

There are many reasons, of course, why forgiveness is rare in human experience. To begin with, forgiveness is hard to do. Think about it; if a husband and wife have said hurtful things to each other in a fight and are now positioned at opposite ends of the house, arms folded in a resentful standoff, shooting hateful thoughts toward the other, everybody knows what they need to do. Even they probably know. Of course they need to move toward the middle, toward each other, with arms outstretched and with genuine words of repentance, reconciliation, pardon, and forgiveness.

So what's keeping them? Plenty, as a matter of fact. If forgiveness is to happen, husband and wife must put aside the need for power—the power of being the one who is "right," the power to punish the other for pain inflicted, the power of revenge for harm that has been spoken and done. They must renounce power and assume vulnerability and weakness for the sake of reconciliation, and this is very hard to do. It goes against

almost every human instinct, every emotional impulse. Forgiveness is rare because it is very hard to do.

But there is another and more significant reason why forgiveness is rare in our experience. Forgiveness is uncommon in human experience not just because it is hard to do, but also because it is *impossible* to do. Part of the reality of human life is that each of us has been harmed by other people and has also inflicted harm upon others. Whether this harm is of the sort that gets discussed on the talk shows—such as child abuse, alcoholism, or domestic violence—or whether it is of the more silent and subtle forms, the fact is that our relationships are not whole. This is what it means to be a sinner; this is what it means to be human. Moreover, these slashes in human relationships are not superficial wounds; the damage runs deep. So, if a child has been assaulted by a parent, if a wife has been abandoned by a husband, if a husband has been betrayed by a wife, if a friend has been disloyal, an employer callous, a leader treacherous, or if in whatever of the many ways that such pain occurs someone has done grievous harm to another, ask the wronged persons to be civil to the offenders and perhaps it can be done. Ask them to be kind, and maybe they can muster that up as well. Ask them even not to repay evil for evil, not to exact revenge for their wrongs, and that can at times be achieved. But do not ask them to forgive. Do not ask them to completely heal the relationship, to withdraw all of the painful memory and to extract any lingering poison. Civility is within our grasp; but forgiveness, true, deep-down, New Testament forgiveness, is not a human possibility.

I know, I know . . . Ephesians says, “Forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” However, if the writer of Ephesians is urging us on like some righteous

basketball coach, “OK team, this time let’s get out there and I want to see some real forgiveness,” then he is wasting his breath. We simply cannot do it. But thanks be to God, this is not what is being said. When Ephesians says, “Forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” this means, in other words, “You can reach out to others with forgiveness because God has already forgiven you. The reality of forgiveness, of sin overcome, of

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wounds healed, of wrongs set right, is already yours. Now you have the vocation of living into what has already been given.”

The New Testament is always calling us to do what we cannot do—to love our enemies, to bless those who persecute us, to pray without ceasing, to be perfect as God in heaven is perfect. The New Testament commands us to live these impossibilities because what is impossible with human beings is possible with God; because we are promised that, as we put one foot in front of the other to seek to live out these commands, what is commanded of us is given as a gift. No, we ourselves cannot forgive, but as we strive to forgive we are given God’s forgiveness as a gift. We are not called to create forgiveness; that is beyond us. We are called instead to participate in a forgiveness given to us as a gift. All of our efforts to forgive those who have hurt and wronged us, efforts that are broken, partial, incomplete, and stained, are gathered into the forgiveness that is full, whole, and pure—the forgiveness God gives in Jesus Christ.

Genuine forgiveness takes time; indeed, it takes more time than we have. There are not enough days in a human life for all the pain to be healed; there are not enough years in history for all the wrongs to be righted. Only in God who is eternal, only in Jesus Christ who is “the same yesterday and today and forever,” is there enough time. God has time for human restoration; God takes time to make peace with humanity. In God’s eternal time, all the wounds have been healed and all of the restless, vengeful spite of human harm has been transformed into reconciliation and peace.

So true forgiveness is rare. We see it only now and then; but when we see it, it is a sign of God’s coming future. We experience it only here and there, but it is a foretaste of what is already true about us in Christ. We can even try to work at forgiveness in our lives, not because we can achieve it, but because it has already been achieved for us, given to us freely, and we can participate in that gift of the Spirit.

I heard once about a pastor of an inner city church who had planned a relaxed evening with his wife at a nice restaurant to celebrate her birthday. They met at the church at the end of the day and headed out the door to the parking lot. However, just outside the church they encountered a crisis in progress. An elderly man and his wife had been walking by the church, and the man had evidently suffered a heart attack. He was lying on the sidewalk and his wife was bending over him, frightened and desperate. The minister rushed over to the man while the minister’s wife ran back inside the church to call for an ambulance. The pastor loosened the man’s shirt, reached out for his hand, and said, “Try to relax. We’re right here with you and an ambulance is on the way.”

To the pastor’s surprise and puzzlement, the man looked up at him and

said, "Forgive me, Charlie."

The pastor did not learn until later that Charlie was the man's son and that father and son had been estranged for many years. The pastor squeezed the man's hand reassuringly and said, "I am not Charlie. My name is Sam. I'm a minister and I'll stay here with you until help comes. Don't be afraid."

But the man responded in an urgent voice, "Charlie, *please*. Forgive me."

"I'm not Charlie," repeated the pastor. "Stay calm now, and we'll get you to a hospital soon."

Abruptly the man's breathing changed and his face turned ashen. It was becoming apparent that his condition was very grave and that he would not make it to the hospital. He whispered, "Charlie, I'm begging you. Please forgive me."

It was now clear to the pastor what he must do. He embraced the dying man and said, "I forgive you. I forgive you." A look in the man's eyes signaled that he had heard these words. Then his breathing stopped, and he was gone.

The next day the pastor wondered and worried about what had happened. What right had he to speak a word of forgiveness on behalf of the man's son? The son was not there; father and son were still estranged. What right had he, a stranger, to speak words of forgiveness when the brokenness was still ongoing, when father and son were not reconciled?

Gradually it came to him that his entire ministry, indeed all of the Christian life, is this way. We are always living God's future in a broken present, the gospel is always a word of reconciliation from God's future spoken ahead of its time.

As for the past, God knows and remembers our sin.

As for the future, God remembers our sin as forgiven.

As for the present, "Forgive one another," because God's future has already been given to you as a gift: "God in Christ has forgiven you."



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