

Freedom: The Fifth Pillar of Joy

"Peter came to him and asked, 'Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?' 'No, not seven times,' Jesus replied, 'but seventy times seven!'"

– Matthew 18:21-22

Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama begin the chapter reminding us of courageous stories of forgiveness: The South African mother who learned of her son's death as witnessed him dragged through the streets on television, and was later able to say to her son's murders, "My child, my child, I forgive you." We are reminded of the story of Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned for 27 years for trying to end apartheid in South Africans, yet upon his release knew that if he could not forgive his jailers, though freed to walk about, he would remain imprisoned to bitterness and hatred. Perhaps you know of such heroic acts of forgiveness? I can recall the mothers of the victims of the Charlottesville church massacre for example, on live TV at the arraignment of the killer of their loved ones, saying to his face, one by one, "we don't know you, but we forgive you." Archbishop Tutu and The Dalai Lama share our awe for such moments and offer 6 principles for our consideration:



1. No one is unforgivable.

Forgiveness begins where Scripture begins: We are all made in the image of God and that we are all beloved children of God. Just as we have within us the capacity for sin, we have within us the capacity to repent and to seek forgiveness. Christ died not for a chosen few, but so that the whole world might be forgiven. Thus no one is outside of the reach of God's love and God's grace, and no one made in the image of God is beyond repentance and redemption.

2. No one is incapable of forgiving.

In the same way, just as we are all forgivable, as God's image bearers, we are also capable and indeed called, to forgive in the same way as we are forgiven. No once. Not twice. But over and over and over again. Recall the parable of the unforgiving servant, who in

response to his own forgiveness by the master, finds himself unable to forgive those indebted to him and is thus finds himself imprisoned to torment. (Matthew 18:21-35)

3. Forgiveness does NOT mean we forget...or that we allow ourselves to be harmed again, or that we accept or approve of wrongdoing or that we stop seeking justice.

Forgiveness is not about allowing harm to continue, nor about keeping ourselves bound to relationships or situations where we are dehumanized or oppressed. As the Dalai Lama emphasizes, we must stand firm against wrongdoing and even take counteraction to put a stop to it, but we must not develop anger or hatred toward the perpetrator. Forgiveness does mean we must sit idly by or throw up our hands at those (or even an system) that does us harm, we must not allow the sin of others to bend our hearts toward hate. As Martin Luther King said, loving one's enemies does not mean I must 'like' them, but it does mean we must never stop striving to see the image of God within them, and thus hold open the door to the possibility of redemption.

(It's important to note that "forgetting" typically refers to the work of reconciliation which is different from forgiveness. Reconciliation is about both parties taking action to heal a rift or a wound. Forgiveness is a unilateral act; something you do in your own heart, without any need for the other person to first ask or to reciprocate in some way and to respond in some way, etc. Forgiveness is a vital step toward possible reconciliation because it begins to lay the foundation for renewal of the relationship, but it should not be confused with reconciliation nor should it be ignored in cases where reconciliation is not seen as possible because as we shall see in #5 below, it is a vital practice in and of itself.)

4. Forgiveness is borne of compassion.

As The Dalai Lama argues, if you can bring yourself to have a sense of concern for the well-being of those who have harmed you, then there is no place for anger and hatred to grow. Finding your way to compassion for those who have done us harm, helps us to re-humanize them and to see them once again not as our enemies but as fellow bearers of the image of God who have somehow become so damaged and distorted along path of their lives, so as to commit acts terrible enough that we might lose sight of their humanity. Compassion helps us to see them anew as the person that God made them to be, rather than the sum of their sin, and in doing so, find our way to forgiveness. As we discovered in our discussion of this concept at the forum, we must be careful to distinguish that this does not mean we are 'excusing' their sin or wrongdoing. Compassion and

forgiveness does not equate to reconciliation or redemption. It merely helps keep the door open to the possibility. Similarly, finding our way to compassion does not equate to forgetting (see #3 above) but merely reminds us of their humanity and in so doing, helps us to hold onto ours — and to the ultimate hope of reconciliation.

5. Forgiveness is the only way to heal ourselves, and to be free from the past.

Without forgiveness we remain tethered to the person who harmed us and bound to the chains of bitterness. Until we can forgive, those who harm us, they will hold the keys to our happiness and will remain the jailor of our joy. When we forgive, we take back control of our own fate and our own feelings and become our own liberator. As Nelson Mandela famously put it, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies." Forgiveness puts us on the path of health and wholeness, which makes us strong enough to become a force for positive change and reconciliation. We cannot love our neighbor so long as we are imprisoned to our resentments toward them.

6. Forgiveness is a sign of strength not weakness.

There was perhaps no moment when the Dalai Lama became more adamant and animated than at his insistence that forgiveness is never a sign of weakness. "Totally wrong. Hundred percent wrong. Thousand percent wrong. Forgiveness is a sign of strength!" Forgiveness is the courage to break the human cycle of resentment and revenge. The natural response when someone hits you is to hit back. But true courage is when you have the strength to unilaterally disarm, realizing that an eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind. As Archbishop Tutu added, "those who say forgiveness is a sign of weakness haven't tried it."

Practicing Forgiveness:

Pay for those who have harmed you. There is probably no simpler place to begin the journey of forgiveness, than prayer. You don't need to forgive them yet. Just pray for their happiness and joy. Try to see them as a fellow child of God who shares many of the same hopes and fears as we all do, and who suffers and acts out of that suffering, just as we all

do. Notice if after a few days or weeks of praying for them, if the door to forgiveness doesn't begin to open.

The Fourfold Path of Forgiveness: In his book, "The Book of Forgiving" Archbishop Tutu presents a four-part, step by step path to practice forgiveness. You can read more at forgivenesschallenge.com

1. **Tell your story.** Forgiveness begins by facing the truth. Write down your story. Tell a trusted friend. Sharing your story allows us to integrate our memories and diffuse our emotional reactivity. To avoid re-traumatizing yourself as you do so, it might help to imagine that you are watching the event happen in a movie. Watch the event unfold as if it were happening to a distant you, all over again, and observe your distant self.
2. **Name the hurt.** As you watch the story of your hurt unfold around your distant self, try to understand the feelings of your distant self. Why did you have these feelings. What were the causes? Ask yourself, how will these feelings affect you 10 years from now? And perhaps most importantly, ask yourself if you want to continue to carry this pain or if you want to free yourself from it?
3. **Grant forgiveness.** The ability to forgive comes from the recognition of our shared humanity and the acknowledgement that, inevitably, because we are human we hurt others and we are hurt by others. Ask yourself, can you accept the humanity of the person who hurt you, and the fact that they likely hurt you out of their own suffering? If you can accept their humanity, then you can begin to release your presumed right to revenge or retaliation, and move instead toward healing.
4. **Renew or release the relationship.** Once you have forgiven someone, decide whether you feel called to renew the relationship or release it. If the trauma is so significant, there may be no going back to the relationship you had before (remember, forgiveness does not mean you forget). Releasing the relationship allows us to move on without harboring resentments, while wishing healing and wholeness for one who harmed us (assuming again, that their actions came out of their own fears or suffering). On the other hand, the process of forgiveness may have opened up the opportunity for a renewed relationship and reconciliation.

Questions For Further Discussion:

1. *How does Christ's life reflect these 6 principles?*
2. *Which of these 6 principles is hardest for you to embrace? Why?*
3. *What gets in the way of forgiveness for you?*
4. *Where in your life is there an opportunity to practice forgiveness right now?*

5. *What might it mean for you if you were able to forgive?*
6. *What might step one in your forgiveness journey look like?*

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