

# Forgiving – May 26, 2013

## *Forgiving*

by David Green

Last summer I wrote a newspaper column about forgiveness. The *Amarillo Globe-News* has me on a rotation with other people who write about religion, appearing in the Saturday edition. It's funny the way these things work, but I really didn't spend much time or energy writing that particular column. It took all of 15 minutes, as I recall. I just had a deadline to meet.

I had recently bought a framed photograph taken by Ralph Duke. It's a stark picture of a billboard he'd seen at the side of a deserted highway in New Mexico. All the billboard says, is the word, "forgive," in big, bold letters. There's nothing else to it. I asked Ralph, and he had no idea who paid for the sign or came up with the idea. But it's kind of a haunting and mysterious thing, both the billboard and the picture Ralph took of it. Part of me would like to know the who and why behind the billboard, but I somehow find it more satisfying to let those details remain a mystery.

Like many things, it speaks for itself in its simplicity and openness to interpretation. Is it a challenge, a reminder, or an earnest plea? Is it meant to affirm or encourage a religious point of view? I like to imagine the sign was placed by a husband who'd messed up royally, hoping his wife would drive by and take a hint. It may be none or all of the above, but as all of us know, there's rarely anything clean and simple about forgiving or being forgiven. In any case, I guess I must like haunting and mysterious things, because I bought Ralph's picture. And, facing a deadline I happened to glance up at it and thought, "Okay. I can write something about... 'forgive'."

The next week and for a long time after it was published, I kept having people email me and coming up to me when I was around town – total strangers – telling me what they thought of my column. Most of them seemed to like it, but what was most revealing were the intense feelings folks had about the whole concept of forgiveness. They shared their own stories about forgiving or being forgiven. On one of those occasions at the grocery store, one lady even wept. A lot of the stories amounted to confessionals about how they had done something wrong, said something unkind, or hurt someone in some way. Then, to their surprise, the person whom they had wronged had forgiven them.

Or, they'd tell me they were struggling with trying to forgive someone else. They had been hurt, and wanted badly to forgive them, but just couldn't – at least not yet. Even though their hurt was deep, they felt guilty, or as if they were somehow morally lacking for not being able to forgive.

And then, others accused me of being too soft, telling me there were some things that did not deserve forgiveness, ever. Funny thing is, I'd never suggested there wasn't; they'd just read that into what I'd written.

In any case, I apparently hit a raw nerve with a fair number of people; it raised my awareness of how powerful the whole concept – and practice – of forgiving is in the first place. In many ways, of how impossible it can be. Or how amazing it is when it does happen. It may be common advice to "forgive and forget," but it's a rare individual who can easily do one or the other, much less both. So, I want to make clear that I don't have a magic formula for forgiving. There are no easy answers.

One of my favorite authors is Frederick Buechner. He's a Presbyterian minister but gave that up a long time ago for writing full-time. Like many writers he comes back again and again toward a particular idea, and the over-arching theme of Buechner's work is the concept of grace: being given a free gift with no expectation of any payment in return.

About grace, he says, "There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth." (a)

People with a more conservative religious orientation are not huge fans of Frederick Buechner. They believe in the concept of grace, but on a conditional basis. Before grace can happen, they'll say, you first have to admit you've been wrong or bad, or make amends. If you don't do those things, you get punished. In other words, grace is sitting on one end of a see-saw, while repentance balances things out at the other end. If you don't behave that way then there's no justice.

Of course, that theological debate has been raging forever. On the one side, you have the Frederick Buechners of the world claiming grace is what it is: forgiveness and acceptance without any conditions. But on the other side you have those who place preconditions on grace; there must also be repentance. In the world of Christianity, both sides of that argument quote chapter and verse of the Bible to support their claims. But the concept of grace itself really goes far beyond any one religious system of belief. It touches on every human relationship no matter where you live or what you believe. What most everyone agrees on is that grace and forgiveness are intertwined. One really cannot exist without the other.

Here's what Frederick Buechner says about forgiveness: "To forgive somebody is to say one way or another, "You have done something unspeakable, 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 stand between us. I still want you for my friend." To accept forgiveness means to admit that you've done something unspeakable that needs to be forgiven, and thus both parties must swallow the same thing: their pride.

This seems to explain what Jesus means when he says to God, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Jesus is *not* saying that God's forgiveness is conditional upon our forgiving others. In the first place, forgiveness that's conditional isn't really forgiveness at all, just Fair Warning; and in the second place, our unforgivingness is among those things about us which we need to have God forgive us most. What Jesus apparently is saying is that the pride which keeps us from forgiving is the same pride which keeps us from accepting forgiveness, and will God please help us do something about it.

When somebody you've wronged forgives you, you're spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience. When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you're spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence." (b)

What I like most about that is the affirmation that the business of forgiving is not easy. Frederick Beuchner uses the word, "pride," as a major roadblock to offering or accepting forgiveness. He quotes the Lord's Prayer as an example, and talks about what might go on between us and God. But on a deeper level he's speaking about a universal human experience – like grace – that goes beyond any one kind of religious belief: it's about what goes on between you and me.

I'm sure our pride *is* a problem in many cases when we've been hurt or we've hurt someone else. But I would also suggest the main barrier to seeking or receiving forgiveness is the hurt itself: the emotional wound that's been inflicted. And that's never a cut-and-dried affair.

At a distance, we can look at someone who's been wounded by another, and is holding onto that hurt, and say, very rationally, "That person just needs to forgive. They're only hurting themselves by not forgiving." But when *we're* the person who's been hurt, we usually sing a different tune. Hurt hangs onto us like a sunburn that never goes away. There are plenty of times when we are victimized, pure and simple. Those occasions require a measure of forgiveness most of us haven't the capacity or the desire to even offer. There are those whose behavior is so horrible, forgiving them is the last thing any sensible person wants to do or can do. There are some actions that just don't seem to merit forgiveness.

This past week a story appeared in the newspaper that was horribly sad all the way around. A woman convicted of murder here in 1998, sitting on death row, recently filed an appeal. Her crime was truly horrific: she killed an elderly man in a particularly brutal way. The victim's son was quoted as saying about the woman, "Seventeen years of tax money went to feed that demon. She saw my dad take his last breath. I want to see her take her last breath." It's apparent that forgiveness is not an option for that son.

On the one hand, I could say all day long to him that watching her be executed would not bring his father back, and that her death would not erase his hurt. So, what would the point of her death be? Revenge? And is revenge the same thing as justice? On the other hand, it wasn't my father who was murdered. I can't put myself in his shoes; I can't presume to know the depth of his hurt. Even after her execution, he'll likely never forgive her. It's heartbreaking from every angle. It's tragic he will likely continue to be in pain and hold onto hatred the rest of his life.

That's a pretty extreme example. Thankfully, the forgiving – or not – that most of us find ourselves dealing with is tame by comparison. But we still have to ask ourselves the question: if I've been hurt – and being human, we've all been wounded – we have to ask, "Do I have the choice to continue in this hurt, or can I find a release from it? What would do me the most good in the long run? Is my pain making any difference at all to the one who wounded me? And if I choose to be released from my pain, then how do I go about that very difficult work? Can I possibly forgive?"

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." I'm sure Gandhi was right, but that also means he was a lot stronger than I am.

I think it ought to tell us something about the nature of forgiveness – of how hard and rare it can be – that when someone asks you to forgive them, it often comes as a surprise. A woman who works for Ellen celebrated a birthday this past week. And in the mail she received a book from her father. Her dad is a recovering alcoholic, and although

he's been sober now for 13 years, for most of her life, he was simply drunk. It wounded her, deeply, and she continues to suffer from that pain.

The book she received was titled "Forgiveness: Finding Peace Through Letting Go," by Adam Hamilton. On the inside cover of the book, her father had written the words, "I'm sorry. Happy Birthday." She told Ellen that for years, her father had been drinking too much to even remember her birthday. They had been estranged from each other, even after he'd stopped drinking. She showed Ellen the book and her father's message, and said, "He could have sent me anything; a lot of money. But this – *this* – is worth more than anything. I'm going to call him," she said, "when I get up the courage to say I forgive him."

The bottom line is that we have all hurt somebody. There are some things we do that no quantity of amends can ever make right. All we can hope for is grace and for the power of love to triumph in a way that goes beyond common sense.

The other bottom line is that we have all been hurt, and forgiving is never easy. But the mysterious paradox is that if we can forgive, our own burden is lifted. The alternative is to be in a perpetual state of mistrust and loathing, and something tells me we were not made to live that way.

Still, forgiveness is probably the hardest act we'll ever attempt to pull off, whether we're on the giving or receiving end of it. It's not my place to know or say to anyone they should forgive, or seek forgiveness. I only know that when forgiveness does come, there is no greater gift.

**Works cited:**

(a) *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, by Frederick Buechner. 1988: HarperCollins.

(b) *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, by Frederick Buechner. 1988: HarperCollins.

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