

# Forgiving – November 1, 2015

by **David Green**

Until recently I wrote a monthly column in the Amarillo Globe-News' "Faith" Section that comes out every Saturday. The other folks who contribute faith columns are really nice. Like me, they're male, white, middle aged or older, and Protestant. So it's a very diverse group.

But I suppose I was the token religious liberal of the bunch. I know that because some of my columns apparently hit a raw nerve, based on the hate mail I received and Internet traffic they generated. On the one hand, I was told the newspaper didn't like it when they got complaints about me, but on the plus side, I was also told it made more people read their paper. Which I had mixed feelings about.

Something in the newspaper about racism or homosexuality or evolution or immigration or poverty and how those topics relate to religion is not what a lot of people want to read over their morning bowl of bran flakes. So they've let me know I'm going to hell for causing them indigestion.

But the truth is, most of what I wrote about is not what I would consider controversial at all. It was more about how we get along with each other in our big wide world, and the ins and outs of everyday life, from my perspective as a theologically progressive person.

So it kind of surprised me – and still does – that it was one of those "non-controversial" columns I wrote a few years back that I've had the most people comment on. Folks have stopped me in the grocery store, even recently, and they'll say, "That really hit home. I've been struggling with that." In fact, I've even spoken about it before right here. So, I apologize for repeating myself if you've heard about it before, but it still keeps coming up!

Maybe it shouldn't be so surprising. The column was about something truly universal that can be both basic and complex, all at the same time. Something we all deal with; that we give or receive, or not. Forgiveness.

I'd written about going to an art show. It was a photography exhibit. And I came across an arresting image: a beautifully stark black and white picture of a large billboard situated along a desert highway.

It was one of those massive towering billboards, poking up out of the ground in the middle of nowhere. The sign consists of a single word, "Forgive," in bold black type on a white background. I kept staring at the picture, and I figured if I was compelled to stare at it that long and so intently, that must've meant something, so I probably needed to break down and buy the thing. And I did.

The photographer was my friend Ralph Duke, and Ralph was there at the show, so I asked him all about it. Where was this sign located, and who in the world shells out money for a gigantic billboard with one simple word? The sign contains no credit, no sponsorship, just the word "Forgive," that you can see from miles away.

Turns out Ralph was driving through New Mexico, saw the billboard (he really couldn't miss it), and with a dramatic cloudy sky and rugged mountains as the backdrop, he knew he had to pull over and take the shot. He was just as mystified as anyone about the sign's author or intent, so he was no help at all.

Part of me really would like to know the who and the why behind the “Forgive” billboard, but I somehow find it more satisfying to let those details remain a mystery. And I was kind of afraid if I did find out it was paid for by some nut, then I’d hate it. So, ignorance is bliss.

Like a lot of things – especially if you don’t know the intent behind it – it’s open to interpretation. It sparks the imagination. Is “forgive” a challenge, a reminder, or an earnest plea? Is it meant to affirm or encourage a religious point of view, or does religion have nothing to do with it?

I’ve even imagined it was paid for by some guy who had messed up royally, and hoped his wife would drive by and take the hint. In a significant way – and maybe this is intentional – the billboard doesn’t make any sense.

But as anyone knows who’s lived on this planet for even a short time, there’s rarely anything clean and simple about forgiving or being forgiven.

We’ve all heard the advice to “forgive and forget,” but it’s a rare person who can easily do one or the other, much less both. And when it does happen, common sense has little to do with it.

True forgiveness is such a scarce commodity because it’s terribly hard for us not to hang onto hurts like a sunburn that never goes away. Not that holding a grudge is something we necessarily enjoy.

In some cases when we feel we’ve been wronged, we know deep down we also own some measure of blame. If that’s true, rather than forgive, it’s far easier to diminish our fault or complicity by amplifying our anger toward the person who’s done us wrong.

On the other hand, there are plenty of times when we are victimized, pure and simple. And those occasions require a measure of forgiveness most of us don’t have the capacity or even the desire to offer. There are some people who behave so horribly, forgiving them is the last thing we want to do.

And we feel justified in that: if we’ve been hurt, we’re not going to go around handing out forgiveness like candy to someone who’s not sorry for hurting us, or who hasn’t admitted they’ve caused us harm. That would diminish or deny the pain we’re still dealing with.

I have a friend whose father served in the Marines during World War II. He was part of the brutal island-hopping campaign across the Pacific, and one stop in particular always haunted him: Iwo Jima. He experienced brutality there that was just inhuman. His best friends were killed right in front of him. The Japanese soldiers simply would not give up, and he had ghastly stories about the atrocities they committed.

He was a kind and gentle and generous man, but his experience in the war had left him with a bitter hatred of the Japanese. He simply could not forgive. For him, to forgive would be denying and diminishing and dishonoring the sacrifice made by his friends and thousands of his comrades.

But on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle of Iwo Jima, he was invited by a veteran’s group to return there. This was a group made up of both American and Japanese veterans who’d raised money for a monument on the island, in memory of all who’d died there, and dedicated to peace.

He wanted to go to honor his friends, but he also didn't want to go, because he still had so much hatred for the Japanese. He did not want to see or meet or be anywhere near a Japanese person, much less a veteran who'd been his enemy.

But my friend, his daughter, convinced him. So, he reluctantly made the trip, they dedicated the monument, and he met the Japanese members of the delegation, who to his surprise, apologized. His initial response was shock and anger. How could a few words spoken 50 years later heal what had been broken? It was too little, too late. How could anyone with any common sense expect forgiveness for what they'd done?

But then he realized they were hurting, too. They had also lost friends. They spoke about the absurdity of war, the waste of human life and potential, the suffering. He said they all just spent a good deal of time not speaking, but weeping, together. What they were experiencing there on that island – those former enemies – went beyond common sense.

And so in spite of himself, he discovered he could forgive. He realized he would actually be dishonoring the memory of his friends by not forgiving. When he left Iwo Jima, he said, for the first time in 50 years, he felt completely at peace.

If forgiving is hard work, needing to be forgiven is no less difficult. There are some things we do that no quantity of amends can ever make right. Very early in my career as a minister I gave a sermon where I made fun of a friend of mine. He was sitting right there in the congregation, and I thought it would be funny to make a comment about how controlling he was. He and I had joked about it just between the two of us. He knew he was a control freak. And so did everyone else. It was common knowledge, and part of his charm.

But as the words came out of my mouth that day that I intended to be hilarious, there was only dead silence. And my friend sat there with his mouth hanging open. He couldn't believe I'd said that about him. And then, I couldn't believe I'd said it. It was a stupid, stupid mistake and I desperately wanted a hole to open up in the floor and just swallow me.

Afterward I apologized profusely to him for saying what I did and embarrassing him in front of all those people who thought I was a huge jerk...and rightly so. There was nothing I wanted more in the world – nothing – than for him to forgive me. It took several days but finally he said, "I know you were just trying to be funny. It's okay."

But the hard thing was, my relationship with him was never the same. We were still friends. But there was always this hurt I'd caused him. And all the apologizing in the world could not completely repair what I'd done. He had forgiven me, but I knew him well enough to know I had wounded him deeply. For him to completely wipe my slate clean was not something I even deserved.

That's the weird thing about needing forgiveness. We need it most from the people we care for and love the most. Because sadly, it's the people we care for and love the most, whom we know how to hurt the most. We know precisely where to plant the dagger.

And it cuts both ways. The deepest emotional wounds we suffer come at the hands of those closest to us. It hurts far more to be burned by a friend or family member than a complete stranger. And we know – when we're the guilty party – we know it when we've hurt someone we love.

When we do, and we hate ourselves for doing it, all we can hope for is the power of love to heal things in a way that goes beyond common sense. If and when that kind of forgiveness comes to us, there's no greater gift.

Ultimately I suppose that's what it means to forgive: to provide someone with an unearned gift, because our care and our love for that person matters more in the big scheme of things than hanging onto resentment.

The mysterious paradox is that by genuinely forgiving, our own burden is lifted. The alternative is to be in a perpetual state of mistrust and loathing, and something tells me we weren't made to live that way.

Still, forgiveness is hard work; probably the hardest act we'll ever pull off, whether we're on the giving or receiving end of it.

Even Jesus was acutely aware of this when he was asked by Peter how many times one should forgive. Jewish tradition in those days apparently followed a standard of forgiving someone at least three times, so Peter suggests that seven "I forgives" would be more than generous.

However, Jesus blows Peter's concept of graciousness out of the water. All at once, Jesus affirms the incredible difficulty of forgiveness, while throwing down an unimaginable challenge: "Forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven." Do what? He might as well have said, "Forgive a million zillion times."

And perhaps that's the point.

Keep on forgiving. Don't stop. You really can't forgive or be forgiven enough. It doesn't make sense, but it'll do you good. It's both the hardest and the best thing we can do.

So, I think, just maybe, I'm beginning to understand the billboard.