

**“Forgiveness: The Most Challenging Spiritual Practice”**

**Ephesians 4:32**

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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Years ago, when I was Dean of the Chapel at Chapman University, a student came to me saying that she was having trouble with the spiritual practice of forgiveness. I invited her to share a little more, if she felt comfortable. Her eyes filled with tears as she told a tragic story of a painful time in her past—one of those awful “#MeToo” moments that we have been hearing about all too frequently in recent days as women are finding the courage to confront their abusers. In her case, the abuser was a relative, which made it doubly violating.

Understandably, she was deeply scarred by the unspeakable experience. But what troubled her that day, what caused her to come to my office, was that she was a devout Christian, yet she couldn’t bring herself to forgive him. I’ll confess, my first reaction was to think, “Can you blame her? How could she forgive such a monster?” Could you?

Fortunately, most of us do not face anything like this horrific crime in our lives, but still—if we are honest—we at times have our own issues with forgiveness. Forgiveness may very well be the most challenging work of our spiritual lives, and yet forgiveness is a consistent theme throughout the Bible. For example, our scripture lesson for today exhorts us to “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

Let me begin my reflections on the spiritual practice of forgiveness on what is probably an unexpected note. Sometimes I fear we try to make forgiveness too easy. Let me illustrate.

I once heard a man on television announce *instant* forgiveness for the shooter who had just taken his wife’s life, and later in the same news broadcast, a woman offered *instant* forgiveness to the drunk driver who left her teenaged daughter paralyzed. I am convinced that *genuine* forgiveness in such tragic situations is not that easy. Pain of that magnitude needs to be respected, felt, and processed, before it can heal sufficiently to enable a person to forgive in the *genuine* sense of the term.

And there is something else about forgiveness we need to understand. When the young woman in my office said she could not bring herself to forgive the relative who had abused her, I discovered through our conversation that she was thinking of forgiveness in terms of her *feelings* toward her abuser. It has been my experience as a minister that people often think that forgiveness means having warm feelings toward someone again. That may well be the case for the minor transgressions we experience in daily life, but not in horrific cases like the coed had experienced. No, forgiveness should not be confused with warm emotions, with warm feelings toward the offender.

In her book *The Fall to Violence*,<sup>1</sup> one of my favorite theologians, Marjorie Suchocki, wrote: “Forgiveness interpreted as feelings . . . has little to do with the realities of violence.” For Suchocki, *forgiveness is a matter of the will, not the emotions*. Forgiveness, she wrote, is the “act of willing the well-being of the other.” Wishing another’s well-being means offering a prayer for the offender’s healing and wholeness. Becoming whole can be a terribly painful process for an offender because it includes the awful self-knowledge of the pain and suffering he or she has caused. But such self-knowledge brought about by being forgiven is essential if a transgressor is to be spiritually transformed.

Clearly, then, forgiveness is good for the forgiven; it awakens them to the pain and suffering their actions have inflicted, and it gives them the opportunity to make amends, to make restitution. But forgiveness is also good for the forgiver. Let me explain.

When we do not forgive, we become obsessed with those who have wronged us, who have hurt us. And this obsession means that we experience the hurt over, and over, and over. Forgiveness, however, releases us from being controlled by dark thoughts of the transgressor and what he or she did to us. Forgiveness creates a new state of being, a spiritual openness, for God to work with. Forgiveness creates new threads for God to weave into the ever-evolving tapestry that is our life, enabling God to bring about something new. In short, forgiving others is spiritually transforming for the forgiver, too.

Though we may never have warm-and-fuzzy feelings toward those who have hurt us deeply, we can find a sense of joy in releasing them to God. During the process of struggling with our pain and our anger, we might feel as if we are being held prisoner in small, dark room. But when we can finally wish the well-being of the violator, we then can say goodbye to that dark prison, walk out into the fresh air of new possibilities, and embrace the warm sun of fresh beginnings. Release from past hurts can help us find our lost zest for living in the present.

Where do you struggle with forgiveness? We have all been wronged, to greater and lesser degrees, and we will continue to be wronged. And sometimes, we are most unforgiving to the person in the mirror. *I can't take back the words I said . . . if only I would have . . . I have ruined everything*. So, let us focus the spiritual practice of forgiveness on ourselves first, and then let us move out toward those who have wronged us.

I invite you to close your eyes and take a deep, calming breath.<sup>2</sup> In a state of quiet meditation, imagine that the voice of self-recrimination and self-anger, is coming from a small child seated in your lap. This is your wounded, inner child. He or she is suffering, is perhaps angry or bitter or ashamed. The suffering child needs a loving parent’s listening ear, love, and forgiveness. Listen to your wounded child. Speak to the wounded child with words of unconditional love. Realize that this love is an awakening to the presence of God, who is love. Feel that divine presence in each kind word you offer to your wounded, inner child. Such is the divine compassion operating within you, working to mend the wounded parts of your soul.

Now, after practicing self-compassion—and with your eyes still closed—let’s employ our imagination toward the offender. In your mind’s eye, visualize yourself in a tiny room with the person who has hurt you. Breathe deeply and slowly, and simply be with your pain without flinching or reacting. Now feel God’s love embracing you, enfolding you like a warm blanket. When you are ready, dare to peel away the veneer of your image of the transgressor until you can catch sight of him or her as a wounded and suffering being, too. Still feeling embraced by the compassionate arms of God, breathe deeply, and say to the offender: “I release you, I forgive you, I wish you well.” Then walk towards the door in that tiny room, open it, and walk out into a lovely day of sunshine and promise. You may open your eyes now.

You may need to repeat this exercise several times a day for a number of days. *Genuine* forgiveness takes time, but it will happen. All it takes is practice. After all, that’s why forgiveness is called a “spiritual practice.” This Lent, let us commit ourselves to engaging in the spiritual practice of forgiveness, for when we do, the refreshing breeze of spiritual freedom and transformation and empowerment will blow through our souls.

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> This guided meditation is inspired by the teachings of the Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh. A summary of his teachings can be found in “Thich Nhat Hanh on Healing the Child Within,” *Lion’s Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for Our Time.* (web)