

# Dispositions of the Heart

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*September 17, 2023*

## Scripture

### Genesis 50:15-21

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

### Matthew 18:21-22

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

## Sermon

Does anyone read the advice columns? Dear Abby... Ask Amy... Dear Carolyn?

I always make time to read the advice columns.

This past week, one letter-writer confessed their inability to forgive themselves for a grievous action taken against a spouse 20 years before. "I have apologized," they write. "My ex has forgiven me, but I can't forgive myself." "If I forgive myself," it goes on, "it's like saying what I did was OK. Will I ever get past this?" Signed – Can't Forgive or Forget. [1]

The columnist wrote, as they so often do, an excellent response – both compassionate and astute. As part of her advice, she wrote this: "Forgiving yourself isn't saying that what you did was OK. Forgiving yourself is saying the opposite, that it was NOT OK, that you did a bad thing that hurt someone, and that is a mistake you acknowledge and will never make again."

So many of the letters in these advice columns are like this one. They are from people dealing with broken relationships: relationships with family and close friends, neighbors --- and even, as in this letter – relationships with oneself, that need mending. People express their deep hurt, their grief, their sorrow because of an experience of woundedness: they've been criticized, betrayed, mistreated, perhaps abused, ignored, shut out, misunderstood. In each of these,

there's such a longing for connection, reconnection, resolution. People are looking for a way to put things right.

In one of the articles shared on our CPC pages for discussion in adult ed, David Brooks commends us --- American society -- to develop skills to live together in community. Among these is the skill of "how to ask for and offer forgiveness." This is one of "the most important skills a person can have," he writes. "And somehow, we don't teach them." [2]

It is the nature of human beings to make mistakes. It is part of our brokenness. We hurt one another. Sometimes these hurts are slight. Other acts are brutal and destructive. Humans -- individuals and societies -- commit atrocities, horrific acts. How can it be possible for connections to be restored?

It is not an easy thing.... forgiveness. And no one says it is, nor that it should be.

Perhaps that's why it's so amazing when we come across it. It is a heroic feat, demonstrating incredible depths of compassion and strength. One could go so far as to say it is an act of holiness... of divine grace... of Christ-like love.

There are stories of forgiveness throughout the Scriptures. The one from Genesis --- the conclusion of the Joseph saga -- is one. Joseph, who had been sold into slavery by his brothers, offers them forgiveness, even when they ask for it in a roundabout way. Out of fear, they approach Joseph, not daring to believe that they could ask forgiveness for themselves. They ask on behalf of their father, Jacob, saying, "I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Then Joseph weeps, his brothers weep, and Joseph forgives them: "Have no fear," he says. And then makes this promise, "I myself will provide for you and your little ones." "In this way," the text says, "he reassured them, speaking kindly to them."

I like this example of forgiveness because it's so specific. We know what grievous harm has been inflicted on Joseph. We know the jealousy and cruelty that have set it all in motion. We've seen his brothers plot to kill him, throw him in a pit, sell him away into slavery. And, despite this... we see into Joseph's heart. We witness the abiding love for his father, his compassion for his brothers, his assurance that God's hand is in it all. And he forgives. The relationship is set right. The family is restored and reconnected.

I confess that my Scriptural counterpart is not Joseph, but Peter. I, too, want to ask Jesus, do I really have to forgive someone? Is there not a limit to compassion, to mercy, to understanding?

When is enough, enough?

I have trouble forgiving even small things: I was driving through Old Ellicott City on my way home from work last week when a woman stepped out into the street and began crossing, without even looking to see if traffic was coming. I saw her and, of course, stopped so I wouldn't hit her. And... wouldn't you know, the car behind me -- even though they had a clear view of what was going on -- honked at me! Excuse me?! It was all I could do to calm my temper when we drove on, to tell myself not to wish ill upon the other driver. It was a deep wrestling match in my soul.

That is why, in the matter of forgiveness, I turn to one of the masters of this art – Desmond Tutu. Rev. Tutu, as you may remember, was a leader in South Africa during and after the racially segregated system of Apartheid. The name itself means “apartness.” It was an institutionalized system where Whites had all power, authority, wealth, control. Blacks and Coloreds were oppressed. Injustice was everywhere: jobs, housing, schools. Archbishop Tutu worked to dismantle apartheid, and later served on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that addressed human rights abuses. Archbishop Tutu had seen the worst of what the world can do: he had been witness to acts of unbearable acts of cruelty, even genocide. And yet, he continued to speak and to write of what is necessary to be done for humanity to be restored.

I commend to all of us a book that he, along with his daughter Mpho Tutu, have written, “The Book of Forgiving.” Oddly enough, it’s not a long book: 225 short pages. Yet it contains a guide, a process, to one of the most difficult, yet necessary things, that human beings can do to, as he says, “become whole again.” [3]

In it, he acknowledges that forgiveness is costly. It is not easy, nor should it be. The path of forgiveness is not an easy one. [4] The practice of forgiving, as he calls it, - the practice of forgiving -- is emotional and spiritual work. It is not a matter of forgetting. Nowhere does he suggest that one should continue in an abusive situation or society. Yet, throughout it he affirms that we are created for fellowship [5]; that it is the way we set our interactions right; the way we mend tears in the social fabric; the way we stop our human community from unraveling. [6] We belong to each other. We are interdependent.

And he notes that failure to forgive is also personally costly. He points out that research is showing that may be a factor for heart disease and high blood pressure. [7] Forgiveness training, he also notes, has been shown to reduce depression, decrease anger, increase hopefulness, improve spiritual connection. [8] “Hanging on to anger and resentment,” he writes, “living in a constant state of stress can damage the heart as well as the soul.” [9] “To forgive... is to release yourself from whatever trauma and hardship you have experienced and reclaim your life as your own.” [10] “Forgiveness,” then, “is the best form of self-interest.” “We don’t forgive for others, we forgive for ourselves.”

Again, he does not ask that people pretend that what happened to cause the hurt did not happen. “Healing does not draw a veil over the hurt.” “For Christians,” he says, “Jesus Christ sets the pattern for forgiveness and reconciliation.” “After the resurrection, he appeared to his disciples. In most instances, he showed them his wounds and his scars. This is what healing demands. Behavior that is hurtful, shameful, abusive, or demeaning must be brought into the fierce light of truth. And truth can be brutal. In fact, truth may exacerbate the hurt; it might make things worse. But if we want real forgiveness and real healing, we must face the real injury.” [11]

In the book, he and his daughter offer a four-fold path to this healing:

*Telling the Story;*  
*Naming the Hurt;*

*Granting Forgiveness;  
Renewing or Releasing the Relationship.*

It's a path that can take years to travel. Forgiveness is a journey. But most of all, and this is where it is speaking to my spirit, forgiveness is a "disposition of the heart." The book begins, not with the techniques, but with the very idea that "before compassion comes the willingness to feel compassion. Before transformation, there must be the belief that transformation is possible. There must be the willingness to be transformed. Before forgiveness, there must be the willingness to consider forgiving." [12]

That's what I hear Jesus saying to Peter. Set no limit on your heart.

Tutu quotes a Gaelic proverb: *Nothing is easy for the unwilling*. Without willingness, the journey will be impossible.

We know this journey is hard. And the outcome is not guaranteed. But Jesus walks with us.

In the prayer he taught his friends, we are offering words from our hearts: Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. It is prayer that invites us into transformation. It acknowledges interdependence. It confesses how much is at stake in the restoration of right relationships.

At the beginning of the worship liturgy, we confess our sin to a merciful and loving God. We ask forgiveness. And we ask for guidance to walk in the right path, the path of wholeness, the path of grace. And each and every time, after our prayer of confession, we hear words of Assurance. God forgives. It is model for forgiveness --- a grace freely given. We are now free to begin again. Through the power of the Spirit, our relationship is set right, restored --- we can continue our worship and praise of God. We are freed to grow in love. We hear anew what God is calling us to do: to go forth into the world -- to help to heal its brokenness, to live as healers, as peace-makers, to set our dispositions of the heart.

Do you recall the movie, "How the Grinch Stole Christmas?" Do you remember the scene where the Grinch's heart grows? It's in a frame, like a picture frame, small and shriveled, and then it expands and expands till it bursts through. It can't be contained!

My heart did that -- a little bit -- when I read Desmond Tutu's book.

Oh no! I haven't even made it to the four-fold technique. But to be invited to see forgiveness as path to healing, as part of my call to peace-making as a follower of Christ, as a way of mending the world. This invitation speaks to me.

There is prayer that is in the book called *The Prayer Before the Prayer*. It is so honest... and it helps to soften and grow my heart. Here's the beginning of it:

*I want to be willing to forgive  
But I dare not ask for the will to forgive  
In case you give it to me  
And I am not yet ready  
I am not yet ready for my heart to soften  
I am not yet ready to be vulnerable again*

*Not yet ready to see that there is humanity in my tormentor's eyes  
Or that the one who hurt me may also have cried  
I am not yet ready for the journey  
I am not yet interested in the path  
I am at the prayer before the prayer of forgiveness  
Grant me the will to want to forgive  
Grant it to me not yet but soon. [13]*

How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?

Seventy times seven. No limit.

I'm ready to start trying. Healing. Mending. Peace-making. For the sake of my heart and for the sake of the world.

How about you?

I invite us, before we sing, to read together the words of Desmond Tutu on page 4 of the bulletin. They are taken from this book. [14] Let us read them together.

*There have been times when each and every one of us has needed to forgive.  
There have also been times when each and every one of us has needed to be forgiven.  
And there will be many times again.  
In our own ways, we are all broken.  
Out of that brokenness, we hurt others.  
Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts.  
It is how we become whole again.*

## Sources

- [1] Dear Amy, Baltimore Sun, Thurs. Sept 14, "I Can't Forgive Myself for Cheating."
- [2] How America Got Mean, The Atlantic, Aug 14, 2023
- [3] The Book of Forgiving: The Four-fold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World, Harper One, NY 2014), 3.
- [4] Ibid, 4.
- [5] Ibid, 217.
- [6] Ibid, 4.
- [7] Ibid, 18.
- [8] Ibid, 17.
- [9] Ibid, 18.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Ibid, 24.

[12] *Ibid*, 8-9.

[13] *Ibid*, 9.

[14] *Ibid*, 3.