

Forgiveness

Joseph Liechty

Search for writings on reconciliation and forgiveness published before the late 1980s, and you are likely to find only a few items, most of them theological reflections on the relationship between God and humanity, without clear relevance for politics, society, or even actual damaged personal relationships, within the church or elsewhere. The dramatic increase in publications on forgiveness and reconciliation since then is easy to explain as the result of the ethnic, national, and religious conflicts that have come to the fore in the aftermath of the Cold War. When retreating to be among one's own people is not an option either during or after conflict (think Northern Ireland, the Balkans, and South Africa, among many others), then a capacity to live as neighbors—to be reconciled—with those who are or have been your enemies becomes the essential peace skill and goal. And everywhere, issues of ethnic, national, and religious identity have come to the fore, accompanied by the challenge of living at peace with difference.

When is forgiving appropriate, and when should we withhold it? Must repentance precede forgiveness? Sound answers require an adequate understanding of the relationship between repenting, forgiving, and reconciliation.

This profusion of literature, however, has brought little clarity about what we mean by reconciliation and forgiveness or about how they work. The confusion, which can involve both intellectual muddle and existential pain, often expresses itself in the form of these vexed questions: When is forgiving appropriate, and when should we withhold it? Must repentance precede forgiveness? That is, is repenting a necessary condition of forgiveness? Sound answers require an adequate definition of reconciliation, and especially an adequate understanding of the relationship between repenting, forgiving, and reconciliation. We need an account of forgiveness that distinguishes between preemptive and

responsive aspects, and an understanding of love that respects both a boundless will to love and its strategic application.¹

Forgiveness and reconciliation

While some see reconciliation and forgiveness as independent and others see them as synonymous, I find it more coherent and powerful to understand forgiveness as fundamentally and ideally an aspect of reconciliation. Reconciliation is the process of healing and restoring broken relationships of all types; it attempts to close the gap between what a relationship is and what it ought to be. While every type of relationship, even every relationship, may require a slightly different form of reconciliation, common to all reconciliation will be the actions of repenting and forgiving—

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repenting on the part of perpetrators and forgiving by victims. When perpetrator and victim have accomplished these in a satisfactory way that is accepted by the other, their relationship may be said to be reconciled.

Understanding forgiving as an action in reciprocal relationship with repenting, with both directed toward the end of reconciliation, may seem to stand opposed to an approach that has become conventional wisdom in some circles: I forgive not so much for the perpetrator or for our relationship as for myself, to release myself from hatred and antagonism that will bind and diminish me. In

one sense, the opposition is deliberate and strong: a Western society endlessly inventive in creating refinements of narcissism hardly needs one more way of serving self, least of all by shrinking to its own withered dimensions an action long understood as serving relationships. But the right connection in forgiveness between its relational direction and the personal benefit deriving from it is more complicated than that. First, the personal benefits that result from forgiving can be real and considerable. We should recognize, even celebrate, these benefits. But nothing is gained and much can be lost by making those benefits the primary purpose of forgiving, by removing forgiveness from the context of reconciliation.

The emphasis on the personal benefits of forgiving can also reflect a second truth, that even when forgiving and repenting are directed toward their proper end of reconciliation, nothing guarantees success. Not every wound can be healed, and not even the most wholehearted forgiving and repenting will always be reciprocated by the other party. People working in pastoral or therapeutic situations may more often than not encounter situations in which the relationship is simply irretrievable, and healing the individuals involved is the most one can hope for. When reconciliation is impossible or when it fails, the healing benefits that can accrue from forgiving and repenting are a just and wonderful compensation. But the accompanying benefits are not the general or primary purpose.

Forgiving as letting go

An analysis of the dynamics of forgiveness brings us to an essential distinction, between expressions of forgiveness that are preemptive, initiating, and even risk-taking, and those that respond to initiatives others have taken. One fundamental aspect of preemptive forgiving is forgiving as letting go. Christians readily understand this aspect of forgiveness, because it corresponds closely with the New Testament meaning of *aphiēmi*, the Greek word usually translated as “forgive.” For many others in modern Western societies, letting go also corresponds with therapeutic understandings of forgiving. Which raises a crucial question: what exactly do we let go of? Answers vary, with anger and hatred being among the most common. While a good case could be made for either or both, I prefer to start with what the theologian Donald Shriver, working from his experience and observation of the U.S. civil rights movement, calls “forbearance of vengeance”: to forgive is, in the first instance, to let go of the right to vengeance.

Recognizing forbearance of vengeance as the beginning of forgiveness has at least two important advantages. First, forgiveness is best understood not as a single, simple act but as a process of coming to terms with injury, insult, and injustice; thus, different expressions of forgiveness will be possible and appropriate at stages along the way. As a first step in forgiving, then, I decide what *not* to do: I have no idea yet what I am going to do, but I am

not going to seek vengeance. This initial decision—not to seek vengeance—may well coincide with the most intense feelings of anger and hatred, and yet it is the foundational step from which everything else will follow, including overcoming or transforming anger and hatred.

If those of us observing a conflict fail to recognize and honor this decision (and sometimes it is less a conscious choice than an impulse—from God only knows where), we may discourage those doing the forgiving. Knowing what they have not yet forgiven—knowing the anger and hatred that remain—they may fail to recognize the enormous significance of what they have already done in forbearing vengeance. We may need to acknowledge that

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the work of forgiveness is not finished—while pointing out that what they have already done is huge, and it is enough for now.

Forgiving does not mean letting go as an unqualified, general posture, or letting go of everything. What we should never let go of, assuming it is well founded, is the justice claim or moral judgment that made forgiveness an option in the first place; forgiveness is a way of pursuing justice, not the abandonment of justice. After all, if forbearing vengeance is the first act of forgiving, it only

makes sense in light of a prior judgment: that an injustice warranting vengeance has been committed, so there is a right to vengeance that can be forborne. Shriver identifies the first of four key markers characterizing a process of political forgiveness (the marks work just as well for interpersonal forgiveness) as “judgment against a wrong perpetrated.”

We confuse the issue of what we are letting go of when we use certain language often associated with forgiving. For example, if a person asks forgiveness for abusive behavior, we might offer it by saying, “That’s all right.” Taken literally, the words are morally hideous: Unjust, abusive behavior is all right? It is acceptable? It doesn’t matter? What we actually mean is something like, “I am willing to consign your abuse to the past, so that it does not dictate the nature of our relationship, and we can be reconciled.” Nothing will ever make injustice all right. But forgiveness can

offer the miracle of freeing us from being bound by the past and letting us move forward together.

A second advantage of understanding forbearing vengeance as the foundational act in forgiveness is that it allows us to position forgiveness properly in relationship to vengeance. Clearly, forgiv-

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ing is an alternative, even a radical alternative. But Paul Keim and I are coming to believe, through our work on vengeance and forgiveness, that it is possible to diminish the value and appeal of forgiveness by overstating or making too comprehensive the way in which it is an alternative. At the extreme, vengeance and forgiveness may be understood as occupying two moral economies so radically different that the people working in them are practically different species, or at least as different as saints and sinners, so that the behavior of one is irrelevant to the other.

And be sure that in these circumstances, most people will understand vengeance as the normal response, all but dictated by human nature, while forgiveness will be understood as effectively supernatural—perhaps admirable, perhaps not, but an oddity of little relevance for ordinary people.

This perception of forgiveness as otherworldly is in the first instance simply unfortunate, effectively depriving people captivated by vengeance of the forgiveness option. This perception also does not square with some important evidence. First, many people struggling with their responses to injury, insult, and injustice do not simply and comprehensively opt for either vengeance or forgiveness; they experience conflicting desires and go back and forth in their thoughts and actions. Second, in a tragic situation I am unable to anticipate with any confidence who will forgive and who will not. If I work backward from their forgiveness, looking for aspects of their experience that may have made forgiving possible or even likely, I can usually find some indicators. But often enough, I discover other people of similar background and experience who respond so differently that I doubt whether one can isolate factors correlating with the likelihood of forgiving. People who act in wonderfully forgiving ways, it seems,

are usually quite ordinary in every other way. Far better then, to posit forgiveness and vengeance as competitors within the single moral economy of human responses to injury, insult, and injustice, both pursuing justice and both seeking to give victims a way to go forward.

Further intriguing evidence comes from an Amish community's forgiveness after the murder of five school girls in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, in fall 2006. In this case, Amish forgiveness was quick, sweeping, and clearly driven by a deep need to forgive. That need was especially striking because it manifested itself at just the stage when many in our society would feel a compulsion toward vengeance.

Two main ways of interpreting the evidence suggest themselves. If vengeance is a core human need, then the Amish appear to be otherworldly and irrelevant, a people who have somehow managed to deny what nature demands. But we have no reason to believe that the Amish differ from other people in their nature. They grieved in their own way, but they felt their terrible loss just as the rest of us would feel it. We may instead see their forgiveness as countering the idea that vengeance is somehow an inevitable human need, a default position. The universal human need may be the necessity of finding a way of moving forward in the aftermath of tragedy, but how we move on may be to a high degree socially constructed. Many societies construct responses that make vengeance normative, and members of those societies feel it as a need. In the Amish reality, forgiveness is normative, even felt as a need. So understood, the Nickel Mines story emphasizes the extent to which vengeance and forgiveness are alternatives in the moral economy of human responses to injury, insult, and injustice.

Forgiveness as love given before

The second expression of preemptive forgiving is forgiveness as love given before—that is, as love given before it is deserved, probably before it is asked for, perhaps before the perpetrator recognizes any need for it. The biblical stories of Zacchaeus and the prodigal son illustrate forgiving as love given before. Jesus treats Zacchaeus lovingly before Zacchaeus has made any changes that would seem to warrant such treatment. And the father welcomes the prodigal with a warmth of love far exceeding what

the prodigal had any right to expect. These stories also illustrate a feature sometimes shared by forgiving as letting go—we recognize forgiveness as a certain way of acting even when (as in these stories) the word *forgiveness* is not used.

Forgiving as love given before is closely related to forgiving as letting go. Love given before makes it clear that all forgiving, at least in a Christian framework, is a form and expression of love. While letting go indicates that forgiving involves options not taken, principally vengeance and the actions and stances associated with it, love given before identifies love as the action, attitude, and motivation that will replace vengeance. Love given before indicates that in the moral economy of human responses to

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These two expressions of forgiveness are also tied together because preemptive love is often expressed in letting go of something. In the stories of Zacchaeus and the prodigal son, Jesus and the father let go of the rights and stances associated with those in positions of honor and status. Similarly, from the beginning of the forgiving process, letting go and love given before are bound together by

forbearance of vengeance, which simultaneously names what is going to be let go of—vengeance—and identifies the forgiveness-initiating act of love.

The practice of forgiveness is grounded in an understanding of love that views it as an action while also respecting powerful feelings of love and the calculated, strategic application of love. Working from but simplifying M. Scott Peck's influential definition in his bestselling *The Road Less Traveled*—"Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth"²—I generally define love as "the will to extend oneself for the good of another." This definition can accommodate the feeling of love but does not require it, which allows for those instances when a person wills to act lovingly even when loving feelings are absent.

Sometimes, however, forgiving does not involve conflicting desires; it flows, so far as is humanly possible, from a perfect conjunction of will, desire, conviction, faith, and feeling. We occasionally see something like it in what Mennonite scholar Gerald Biesecker-Mast affectionately calls the Mennonite legacy of “knee-jerk forgiveness.” Surely this is part of the explanation for the Amish forgiveness at Nickel Mines. Wherever it is found, this overflowing will to forgive should be honored, because so much good can come of it. But even the most purely motivated and powerful will to forgive is best implemented thoughtfully, even strategically, because purity of intent does not always yield good results. A powerful example is the feminist critique of the kind of forgiveness that sends an abused spouse back to the abuser. In deploring the consequences we need not doubt the forgiver’s intent.

Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf offers a simple but powerful way of honoring both the will to forgive and the necessity of forgiving thoughtfully. The will to embrace (his metaphor for reconciliation, which may surely be extended to forgiveness and all forms of love) may be absolute, unqualified, unconditional, and limitless, he says, but the act of embrace must be considered, calculated, strategic. That acts of love must be strategic should not surprise us. Parents discover that although our love for our children can make us wish we could give them everything they want, acting on these impulses would not be good for them. The Mennonite response to famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s was to give generously, shipping as much food as possible, but Mennonite Central Committee workers on the ground knew that some of those shipments depressed food prices in Ethiopia and hindered planting the next crop. Some food even went to mafia-like organizations rather than to hungry people. Acting in a loving way meant thinking strategically. In fact one could reasonably interpret MCC’s work around the world as a massive set of calculations about how to love well in church, social, and political arenas.

Taking a break as I write this paper, I pick up the *Chicago Tribune* (5 March 2007) and read an article about a Lutheran congregation in Reno, Nevada, deciding how to respond to a convicted sex offender who wants to participate in their church

and in fact regards it as part of his rehabilitation. The associate pastor says, "Clearly, we are called to love. But is it safe to love this particular person up close?" Whatever the answer, the congregation would be wrong not to ask some version of this question about what love means in this case. Being strategic about how to love does not contradict love; it is a necessary expression of love.

Forgiveness as absolution

If letting go and love given before are the preemptive and risk-taking aspects of forgiveness, a third element, crucial but distinct, also needs to be named. It is absolution, a response to honest repentance by a perpetrator and therefore the deal-sealer in the reconciliation process. In one sense, absolution may be best understood not as a separate element of forgiveness but as the final act of letting go and the final act of love (now given after rather than before). In forgiveness as absolution, the wronged party indicates an intention not to bear grudges.

It is useful to name absolution separately from letting go and love given before, partly because absolution is a response, not an initiative, and partly because it is the source of difficulties in interpreting and acting on forgiveness. The difficulties arise principally because people too frequently equate forgiveness with

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absolution, a particular and limited aspect of forgiveness. Failing to make this distinction contributes to difficulties in answering the vexed questions I asked earlier: When is forgiving appropriate, and when should it be withheld? Must repentance precede forgiveness; that is, is repenting a necessary condition of forgiveness?

The answers depend, of course, on which aspect of forgiveness one is talking about.

Letting go and love given before can, in theory, be applied appropriately at any point in a conflict and in any relationship. Forgiving vengeance is always appropriate, as is loving, although in many cases it will be best acted on with care and deliberation about likely effects and outcomes, rather than as a simple reflexive action. Absolution, on the other hand, with its strong religious overtones of releasing the guilty party from the consequences of

sin, and thus putting an end to the matter, will ordinarily be appropriate only at the end of a reconciliation process, as a response to repentance.

Whether forgiving and repenting need to proceed in a particular order likewise depends on which aspect of forgiving is involved. Again, absolution should normally follow repentance. If absolving means releasing from the consequences of sin, doing so consistently—and without regard to whether the guilty party has repented—could bring forgiving into contempt, as a form of cheap grace. Letting go and love given before require no prior repentance, however, and in fact their power to bring change lies in their preceding repentance. Setting absolution aside, repenting may inspire forgiving, or forgiving may inspire repenting. Such is their power, that repenting and forgiving can work past all kinds of misconceptions to achieve reconciliation. But sometimes clear understanding can serve good practice.

Notes

¹ Some of the ideas in this essay have been developed at greater length in Joseph Liechty, “Putting Forgiveness in Its Place: The Dynamics of Reconciliation,” in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions in Theology*, ed. David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006); other ideas have been influenced by research on vengeance with my Goshen College colleague, Paul Keim.

² M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 81.

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