

70 X 7... Undeserved Forgiveness.

Introduction

This conference will deal with Mercy as undeserved forgiveness. The first conference described God's mercy toward us.

"70 X 7" is the title of this conference. This refers to Jesus' story in Mathew 18:21 – 35.

Then Peter came up and asked him, "Lord, when my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times?"

"No," Jesus replied, "not seven times: I say, seventy times seven times."

Then Jesus goes on to tell Peter that the Reign of God will be like a king who settled accounts with his officials. One came in who owed the king a 'huge' amount. The official prostrates himself and said,

My lord, be patient with me and I will pay you back in full.

Moved with pity the master let the official go and wrote off the debt.

That's mercy – unmerited forgiveness.

Now this same official runs into a fellow servant who owed him a small amount and impatiently refuses to forgive the debt. He has him 'put in jail.'

The master hears about this and rebukes his official.

I canceled your debt when you pleaded with me. Should you not have dealt mercifully with your fellow servant, as I dealt with you?

Jesus instructs us that we are to act as the master acts.

If we do not, Jesus tells us that

My heavenly Father will treat you in exactly the same way unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart.

Pope Francis calls our church to be a house of healing, a home of mercy.

Jesus challenges us to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful. (Lk 6)

I The Challenge of Mercy as Undeserved Forgiveness.

From the Desk of Donald Ware, C.P.

From the October 2016 Retreat

I believe our first challenge is to realize that we have received God's mercy... God's unmerited forgiveness.

We live in an age when the whole concept of 'sin' and forgiveness is a memory of the past. People don't think of themselves as sinners today.

- It's not adultery, it's fooling around.
- It's not greed, it's 'pushing the envelope.'
- It's not lust, it's just a little porn.
- It's not anger, it's justified resentment and vengeance.
- It's not laziness, it's just enjoying hours and hours of TV.
- It's not spiritual laziness, it's 'I don't have time for God in my busy day'.
- It's not gluttony, it's binge snacking.
- It's not envy or jealousy, it's wanting to have what our next door neighbors have.

These used to be called the 7 capital sins... sinful because they hurt ourselves and others and could ruin our peace of mind and heart and steer us onto a way that is not God's way.

In the past when we got caught up in any of these behaviors we used to examine our conscience and go to Confession and promise to change our ways with the help of God.

We would depend on God's merciful forgiveness and ask God's help to amend our lives.

Now, many people don't go to confession that much and aren't asking God's help with these destructive behaviors that much. Many say, 'that's just the way I am'.

We forget the beautiful image in the Letter to the Hebrews where we are pictured following our loving Jesus into the inner sanctum of God to the very throne of God...

So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and favor and to find help in time of need. (4:16)

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Do we realize that we have received God's mercy and our sins forgiven and we can now come into God's presence with thanksgiving and praise?

Do we realize how blessed we are?

In the image of Jesus' story in Mathew 18,
do we realize that our debt has been wiped away by God?

Some of us have a difficult time forgiving ourselves,
even if we know that we have been forgiven by God and by others.

Forgiving ourselves can be quite a challenge for us and it may take time.

Part of the problem is that we are still very self-centered... life is still about us.

We don't have humility yet – the humility to realize that we can't, God can...

the humility to deflate our ego, kick it off of the throne of our hearts

and let our merciful God into our hearts to assure us that we are forgiven.

Jessica Powers, a deceased Carmelite nun who composed beautiful religious poetry penned these words in her insightful poem **The Mercy of God...**

*I rose up from the acres of self
That I tended with passion and defended with flurries of pride.
I walked out into the woods of God's mercy
And here I abide.*

We learn to forgive ourselves because we experience in our hearts the forgiveness of our loving and merciful God.

We know that God's 'mercy' is our undeserved forgiveness.

It is in this context that Jesus now challenges us to be a forgiving people... to bring forgiveness into our revenge and violence soaked world, so in need of forgiveness.

Ronald Rohleiser in his wonderful book **Sacred Fire**, remarks that life is a conspiracy between God and nature to mellow our soul.

He says:

... All of us have been wounded. No one comes to adulthood with his or her heart fully intact. In small ways or traumatic, we have all been treated unjustly, violated, hurt, ignored, not properly honored, and unfairly cast aside. We all carry wounds, and, with those wounds, we all carry anger, bitterness and some nonforgiveness. (P 257)

These wounds can easily embitter and harden our soul. In this conference I want to help you deal with these challenges in your life, to recognize God's grace even in the midst of them, and to mellow your soul, rather than turn your soul to resentments, bitterness and even hatred.

Rolheiser continues:

... As we age, we can begin to trim down our spiritual vocabulary, and eventually we can get it down to three words: Forgive, forgive, forgive! To die with a forgiving heart is the ultimate moral and religious imperative... All the dogmatic and moral purity in the world does little for us if our hearts are bitter and incapable of forgiveness. (P. 256)

If we listen to the words of Jesus, and observe his own actions, we come up against the teaching and life style of forgiveness, and Jesus' challenge to us to be people of forgiveness.

What can we say about forgiveness on our life's journey?

Is it doable? Some would ask if it's even healthy?

II Obstacles to Forgiveness

I would like to image a different world from the one we live in every day...

We live in an unforgiving, violent culture.

This is one of the main obstacles to being a forgiving person.

Physical violence is exalted in so many forms of competition.

So many TV programs are violent and unforgiving.

TV shows seldom if ever deal with forgiveness. Rather they tell the story of combating wrongs and capturing or killing the bad guys...

There are very few stories of forgiveness to show us what forgiveness is all about.

And what about violent, revenge soaked movies, computer games and rap music?

How often do you read about forgiveness in your Newspaper or see stories of forgiveness on TV News.

I would like to describe how we might achieve a life style of forgiveness. This is so important lest we devolve into bitterness, skepticism and cynicism as we go along the journey of our lives, especially into our mid life and later elder years.

III What Forgiveness is Not...

Some of the difficulties people have with forgiveness are tied to confusing forgiveness with what is not necessarily forgiveness.

Let me illustrate.

An acquaintance in New York lost his business when his partner swindled him out of \$500,000...

My friend carried hatred and rage around in his heart toward his ex-partner for several years. There was no way he could get his money back.

My friend finally realized that he was in fact only hurting himself.

His ex-partner wasn't wasting time thinking about him.

My friend realized that he was carrying his ex-partner around in his head, and anger and hatred in his heart, to what purpose? Nothing was going to change.

Revenge? How? Why?

This man realized he had to give up his hatred and anger and thoughts of revenge. Could he go further and even forgive his partner?

Forgiveness is not about *forgetting*,

nor is it *pretending* we're not hurt or angry.

It is not necessarily *reconciling* with the person who hurt us – at times that would be neither possible nor healthy.

Forgiveness is not about *getting back* what we lost.

Nor is it *pretending* that we messed up and are to blame.

Let's go back to my friend in N.Y...

My friend did not forget what his partner did to him,
nor did he pretend he wasn't hurt or angry.
He didn't reconcile with his ex partner,
nor did he get his money back.
He didn't blame himself for the crime his partner did.
My friend came to realize thru prayer and some counseling
that he had to let go of his anger and rage,
he had to unlearn daydreams of revenge,
and the constant negative thought patterns he had engaged in.
He learned to forgive his ex-partner, place him in God's hands,
and be about his life.

All of this took time, but he has been successful.

Has he forgotten? No, but his memory is not laced with anger
and rage. And he has learned a little more prudence and
wisdom.

Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the
future. (Paul Boese)

IV What Forgiveness Is

What *is* forgiveness?

Forgiveness is more than just an individual act of forgiving.

Forgiveness is a way of life, a lifestyle.

It is a way of behaving which influences one's whole life –
a general tenor of our journey of life.

Jesus Teaching

For the Christian, forgiveness as a way of life is seen against the backdrop of the teaching and life of Jesus whom we follow.

A number of Jesus' stories focus on forgiveness.

The Prodigal Son of Luke (15) shows us the father's mercy toward or undeserved forgiveness of his son who has squandered his part of the inheritance.

The father takes him back.

We also have the story that we began this conference with...

In Mt 18 Jesus tells Peter that he must forgive his brother 70 X 7 times. I would bet that Peter found this hard to understand.

And, of course, we know that Jesus goes further than this. He practices what he preaches. From the cross we hear Him pray:

Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.
(Lk 23:34)

God's dream for us, given us by Jesus, is that God wants to mend our world. Mercy or undeserved forgiveness is part of God's way of mending.

By our Baptism we are bonded to God's dream and God's mending work.

Let's pray for help to understand what this means for our lives, as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

The Craft of Forgiveness

For the Christian forgiveness is well described as a craft.

It is a process, a style of life, a way of living.

It is nourished by Jesus' life and teaching.

It is *embodied* in the lives of other Christians who become mentors, as it were.

Do you know any Forgiveness Mentors?

We need to hear their stories – stories of forgiveness - so that we can learn the craft of forgiveness.

A recent "Forgiveness Story" occurred during the first week of October, 2006, in Lancaster County, PA.

A depressed and angry bus driver shot 10 young Amish schoolgirls in their one room schoolhouse in central PA.

The entire Amish community reacted with grief, but also with words and sentiments of forgiveness for the disturbed individual who had perpetrated this crime.

One of the parents of the slain schoolgirls went to the home of the killer and told his wife that the Amish community forgave her husband for what he had done.

The Amish community also offered to share some of the monies that were given to them by fellow Americans... the family could use it for the education of their children.

The wife of the gunman who killed the girls released a statement thanking the Amish and others the Lancaster County community for their "forgiveness, grace and mercy."

She said that her and her three young children have been overwhelmed by the community support since the Oct 2nd shootings.

I remember seeing an interview on TV with a Mennonite midwife who had been present at the birth of many of the slain girls.

When the interviewer asked her what her reaction was, she responded that she grieved for the loss of such innocent life, but that she, along with the Amish families, forgave the killer.

The interviewer was stunned and at a loss for words. She didn't know what to say.

She stood there with the midwife, speechless.

In our violent, revenge-soaked society, the midwife's response made no sense.

The interviewer asked, "How can you say that?"

The midwife answered that this was her belief and the belief of the Amish community. Jesus showed us the way. Either we live with resentments, revenge and rage in our hearts, or we forgive and walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

*Do we have a hard time understanding that?
Would we react in the same way?*

What stories of forgiveness do you know?

Have you met any *Forgiveness Mentors*?

If so, talk with them. Ask them questions. And listen to their stories.

The Process of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a *process*.

If we're hurt, we need to tell our story to someone who cares and can acknowledge our wound, our hurt and our anger.

This can take time.

As we tell our story to another, we can also begin to ask God to help us forgive, or to even want to forgive.

Of course, if you are in an abusive relationship, first get out of it – leave. Seek help.

When we finally want to forgive with God's help, we begin to be free from the past,

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we are no longer victims of the past, held in its bondage.

We can now become survivors.

The past will no longer control us.

We won't forget it or condone it, but we will be freed from it more and more.

To arrive at this point we might also need the help of a counselor, or a trusted and levelheaded friend who will listen to us and encourage us.

Forgiveness weakens the power of the past to hold us victim in bondage to the past. The *victim* now becomes a *survivor*.

Surviving means that there is life after the trauma of the past.

We saw this process in the example of my friend who had to overcome the trauma of his business partner's betrayal.

He had to forgive and get on with his life.

But now, because of what he has learned, he helps other business people in similar situations as he was – he is able to turn his past hurt and trauma into a life giving sharing which helps others....

His woundedness can help bring healing to others.

He has become a *forgiveness mentor*.

Forgiveness brings us peace of mind and serenity...
as we follow in the footsteps of the forgiving Jesus...

And remember, Jesus took his wounds to heaven with Him.

By his wounds we are healed...

Our wounds can help us bring God's healing to others!

Do we ever realize this?

Asking for Forgiveness

The last part of forgiveness is asking for forgiveness. This is not always easy. Many of us don't really know how to ask for forgiveness.

I want to give some ideas from an interesting book entitled **Five Languages of Apology**, by Dr. Gary Chapman. The author points out that there are five basic approaches to asking for forgiveness, five ways people ask for forgiveness. Each is a bit different from the other and some are more effective with some people than with other people. Here is a basic list of the five ways of asking for forgiveness:

- Express regret... I am sorry.
- Accept responsibility... I was wrong.
- Make restitution... what can I do to make it right?
- Genuine repentance... I'll try not to do it again.
- Requesting forgiveness... will you please forgive me?

All of these ways of apologizing require courage, humility, and wisdom. It might take time for the other person to forgive us.

Give time time.

If you want to better understand these five languages of apologizing please pick up the book – it's worth a good read.

Conclusion

These are wonderful stories of mercy and undeserved forgiveness,

which give us hope and example and challenge.

Can we learn the craft of forgiveness as part of our journey of life?

Can we ask for mercy and give forgiveness?

Can we ask God's help, to grant us the grace of being a forgiving person?

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation we ask God's forgiveness for our sins.

God, as the loving and merciful Father of the Prodigal Son, will graciously welcome us home and forgive us, whatever our sin.

Then Jesus asks us to be forgiving people, in a world of unforgiveness, violence, revenge, and anger – so much needless pain. This is not God's dream for us. Forgiveness shows us the way to God's dream – that we live in peace of mind, serenity, and joy of spirit, experiencing the freedom of the sons and daughters of God.

(from Richard Rohr)

Jack Kornfield offers a wonderful meditative practice of forgiveness:

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[Sit] comfortably. Allow your eyes to close and your breath to be natural and easy. Let your body and mind relax. Breathing gently into the area of your heart, let yourself feel all the barriers you have erected and the emotions that you have carried because you have not forgiven—not forgiven yourself, not forgiven others. . . . Let yourself feel the pain of keeping your heart closed. Then, breathing softly, begin asking and extending forgiveness, reciting the following words, letting the images and feelings that come up grow deeper as you repeat them.

Asking Forgiveness of Others

Recite: "There are many ways that I have hurt and harmed others, have betrayed or abandoned them, caused them suffering, knowingly or unknowingly, out of my pain, fear, anger, and confusion." Let yourself remember and visualize the ways you have hurt others. See and feel the pain you have caused out of your own fear and confusion. Feel your own sorrow and regret. Sense that finally you can release this burden and ask for forgiveness. Picture each memory that still burdens your heart. And then to each person in your mind repeat: "I ask for your forgiveness, I ask for your forgiveness."

Offering Forgiveness to Yourself

Recite: "There are many ways that I have hurt and harmed myself. I have betrayed or abandoned myself many times through thought, word, or deed, knowingly and unknowingly." Feel your own precious body and life. Let yourself see the ways you have hurt or harmed yourself. Picture them, remember them. Feel the sorrow you have carried from this and sense that you can release these burdens. Extend forgiveness for each of them, one by one. Repeat to yourself: "For the ways I have hurt myself through action or inaction, out of fear, pain, and confusion, I now extend a full and heartfelt forgiveness. I forgive myself, I forgive myself."

Offering Forgiveness to Those Who Have Hurt or Harmed You

Recite: "There are many ways that I have been harmed by others, abused or abandoned, knowingly or unknowingly, in thought, word, or deed." Let yourself picture and remember these many ways. Feel the sorrow you have carried from this past and sense that you can release this burden of pain by extending forgiveness whenever your heart is ready. Now say to yourself: "I now remember the many ways others have hurt or harmed me, wounded me, out of fear, pain, confusion, and anger. I have carried this pain in my heart too long. To the extent that I am ready, I offer them forgiveness. To those who have caused me harm, I offer my forgiveness, I forgive you."

Let yourself gently repeat these three directions for forgiveness until you feel a release in your heart. For some great pains you may not feel a release but only the burden and the anguish or anger you have held. Touch this softly. Be forgiving of yourself for not being ready to let go and move on. Forgiveness cannot be forced; it cannot be artificial. Simply continue the practice and let the words and images work gradually in their own way. In time you can make the forgiveness meditation a regular part of your life, letting go of the past and opening your heart to each new moment with a wise loving-kindness. [1]

Gateway to Silence:

Let be. Let love.