

Making Things Right

1 John 1: 9

The topic is confession and forgiveness and the questions are pretty basic. What is forgiveness and why must we confess? What are the *how's*, the *when's* and, and the *why's* of forgiveness? How do we forgive others? Is it as easy as *forgive and forget*? What if we cannot forget because it is hard to forgive again and again -- and again?

What is forgiveness? What does it mean to forgive or to be forgiven? A dictionary definition of forgive is "to cease to feel resentment against an offender; give up resentment of; pardon." (Websters 7th Edition) The syllables themselves seem to mean to *give before*. One way I think of forgiveness is to *let go of first*. Release the blame. Don't lose the learning, but let go of the feeling.

Another dimension of forgiveness comes from the Lord's Prayer in its different versions (Matthew and Luke). "Forgive us our *trespasses*, our *sins*, and our *debts*." (Matt. 6: 12, 14; Luke 11: 4) There has been a movement among many social justice groups, especially around the year 2000, to encourage wealthy nations to forgive third world debt in the spirit of Jubilee (the biblical year of Jubilee in which all debts were to be cancelled every fifty years)

To forgive, in financial terms, means to make a debt *go away*. Once it is gone, it exists no more! To forgive means to cancel out as though it never happened. In some ways, that kind of forgiveness sounds pretty naïve, foolish, and radical. Forgiving indebtedness does not mean you have to lend more money to that same person. Forgiving a wrong does not mean being gullible. You do not have to trust that person the next time. Don't lose the learning you have gained from the experience. You may choose to trust them again, but it's a judgment call. Be smart, but let go of any grudges. Remember that holding a grudge is like drinking poison and expecting someone else to die!

What is the meaning of confession? The dictionary defines confession as, to acknowledge guilt." It means to tell the truth, to come clean, and to be honest. In religious terms, do we have to confess in order to receive forgiveness? Why must we confess? This idea reminds me of a movie scene in which a prisoner is tortured. The questioner tells him, "Just confess and you won't suffer any more." Being required to confess sounds like something from the Inquisition.

Must we confess in order to receive forgiveness from God or is that we have a need to confess in order to be honest, to tell the truth, and to clear the air? In response to my congregation's financial stewardship campaign last spring, I started keeping an expense log. I took on the discipline of writing down all my expenditures and it has been really difficult for me. The hardest part is to *own* all my expenditures. It is like confessing myself. Now I'm doing the same thing with a food journal, tracking what I eat. This is an even more difficult confessional than money.

The underlying question is this: is confession a requirement in order to be acceptable to God? This is certainly the perspective with which we usually read the scripture text from 1 John: 9 (NRSV). “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Such a reading reflects the language of the Temple. It is the legal and ritualistic language of a sacrificial system, the language of purification and appeasement. From this perspective, confession is the required sacrifice in order to receive forgiveness and to be accepted by God. Reading it this way is probably a fair reflection of the mindset of much of the Christian tradition.

My response, in terms of confession and forgiveness is that the relationship with God and us rests on two foundations. The first foundation is that God does not need us to do anything in order to forgive us and restore any relationship that is broken. By definition, God is fully capable of bringing about reconciliation without relying on us. Therefore, the conditional “if, then” is not really accurate. God’s grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation are freely given with no strings attached. It is not conditional – like an idea mother’s love or perhaps like a dog’s devotion.

The second foundation in terms of the purpose of confession as it is connected to forgiveness is that it opens us both to receive and to give forgiveness. Many people’s big concern is, “Will God forgive me? Will other people forgive me?” The promise of our faith is that forgiveness is given as needed, without condition or hesitation. It is given more quickly than we’re even aware. The instant we need it, it’s there. The real question is our ability and willingness to forgive others and ourselves. Forgiveness, when it is embraced, offers new life.

How can we forgive over and over and how can we do so without feeling resentful, foolish and naïve? Jesus was teaching his disciples about dealing with conflict. Finally, “Peter got up the nerve to ask, ‘Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?’ (The Law required seven times) Jesus replied, ‘Seven! Hardly! Try seventy times seven.’” (The Message) As Peter’s brain crunched the numbers, you could almost hear Jesus say, “No, Peter, not even 490 times. I’m talking hyperbole here. As soon as the number is fixed – forgive this much, but no more – then you’ve fallen short of the Kingdom of God. True forgiveness has no limit. There is no keeping score.

My ability and my willingness to forgive you is a product of my own health and the healing I have experienced. My ability to forgive myself and to receive forgiveness from you fully has everything to do with the healing of my wounds. It has everything to do with my self image – seeing myself as whole with clear boundaries. I struggle to forgive to the extent that I am hurting and broken.

Forgiveness is the gift we give ourselves. It enables us to get back inside our own skin, to be less self-conscious. Embrace forgiveness lets us be more focused on the love of neighbor and the love for God around and within us.

Forgiveness is a skill we can develop. It takes time and practice to do it well. When we do it well, it changes our whole perspective. A great example of this is found in Donald

Miller's book *Blue Like Jazz* (p. 118). The young Christian organization decided the best way to communicate the essential message of faith and the true power of Christianity to their anti-religious peer group was to place a confessional booth right in the middle of a spring Bacchanalian festival on campus. But the point was not that they would hear confessions from their peers. It was that they would confess to their fellow students - confess how they had failed to exemplify Jesus by loving others. They would offer apologies for everything from the crusades to televangelists! The result of their action was powerful. Rather than being defensive in the face of an attitude of moral superiority, students who came into the confessional booth actually offered forgiveness to those representing the Church. The Christian students felt, at least at some level, a sense of renewed life - born again to what being a follower of Jesus really means.

Confession serves to soften boundaries and make them permeable. It is most effective when confession emerges from strength – when you don't have to confess. Is there something holding you back from living with a sense of hope and joy? Does that *something* involve another person or a past event? Is there anything you really want, or need, to lay down – just let go? Make that decision to let it go. Each time you're aware that it comes back, let it go again seventy times seven time and as many more times as you need to until it's gone for good.

To confess is to know yourself well and to acknowledge your failures and your needs. It is most powerful when not coerced. To forgive is to choose to practice the art and the science of reconciliation. It is to be like Jesus.