

“Letting Go of Resentments”
Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt

We have the opportunity to consider forgiveness. We looked - this is a continuation of the passage that I looked at two weeks ago, when we were looking at conflict and conciliation - and this is a parable describing our requirement to forgive one another. It is a parable about mercy of a debt being released. But the point of the parable is not that we would forgive other peoples' debts the way that our debts have been forgiven, but that we would forgive one another the way that God has forgiven us.

How has God forgiven us? God forgave us before we knew to apologize. In Romans 5:7-8 it says, *very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

So, the parable is an admonition to forgive as we have been forgiven. The Lord forgave his slave, and then his slave was unwilling to forgive the fellow slave. How is it we are to forgive? How has God forgiven us? As Romans says, *God forgave us while we were yet sinners. God forgave us before we admitted any wrong.*

How do you do that? How do we forgive someone who hasn't asked for forgiveness? Is that even possible?" Forgiving someone in this situation is different from reconciliation, because to really reconcile with one another, there does need to be some sense of accountability, some admission of guilt. We can't fully relate anew with someone if they have not admitted some wrongdoing to us. We crave justice. We need justice. And we want people to be held accountable. Frankly we are prone to want to hold on to resentments.

I resent simple things. I resent stop lights. [Laughter.] I resent my keys, when they aren't where they are supposed to be. Most of my frustrations are those simple things. I get angry with inanimate objects [laughter] that have no moral culpability. I just have no patience for anything that slows me down.

But there are deeper resentments that we have. There are resentments that we have when someone has wronged us. And, when someone has wronged us and has not acknowledged this, we have a tendency to hold onto that. It's like we want to stay angry. "I deserve this anger. I deserve to keep holding on to this." If we feel that way, we probably have moved on from wanting justice to wanting vengeance. There is a difference.

When we want vengeance, we want to make them feel like we feel. We want to hurt them how they have hurt us - and that is not justice. When we let go of resentments it is something that we do for ourselves. It's not something that we do for the person that we are forgiving; although it can certainly help us as we are relating to them if we no longer hold animosity to them. It can, for instance, help us to be able to talk to them again in a way that is not accusing or angry – hostile. But it's about us forgiving one another as God forgave us. Forgiving one another before we ask for forgiveness is how God forgave us. It is something that we are released from.

We have an opportunity to carry around our resentments for our entire lives, to hold on to baggage from years past - but this keeps us from a spiritual freedom. I have benefitted from spiritual mentors who are knowledgeable in 12-step spirituality and they have been able to share with me the letting go of resentments that they do. The way they described it: angry resentments were the dubious luxury of normal men, but to alcoholics they are poison. The way these folks shared with me was essentially, “we will kill ourselves by holding onto resentments. If we hold onto resentments, we will drink. We will drink through it, and that will kill us.” So, they did not have the luxury of holding on to resentments. I appreciated the way they put it - the “dubious luxury.” Is it so much a luxury to be an ordinary person capable of holding onto resentments?

Resentments keep us from being spiritually free. They can drive us. They can make us reactive. They can make us unavailable to God’s use.

So how do we let go of resentments? How do we forgive someone who has wronged us, particularly if they are not admitting they are wrong? My mentor in this described two things: The first was to pray for willingness to forgive them. Sometimes we need to pray not just to do something, but for the willingness to do it. I don’t even want to forgive them, so maybe we have to start praying for the willingness.

We can pray, “God grant this person all that I want for myself, that he or she may be happy and be joyous and free.” This is what a mentor shared with me. He said, “If you are upset with somebody, pray that every day until you are ready to think about forgiving them. Pray every day that they would have everything that I want for my life, that they may be happy, joyous and free.” And, finally, when I was ready to come before God and release them from my resentment, they [the mentors] invited me to pray this prayer:

“This person is spiritually sick. God help me show this person the same tolerance and pity and patience that I would cheerfully grant a sick friend.”

This is the means of letting go, that those in the 12-step spirituality community have learned to let go of resentments they could not live with. First, to pray for the willingness to forgive and, then, to forgive through pity, essentially, recognizing that we are all broken people, that we are all spiritually sick in some way, and be willing to forgive that person - to show them the same tolerance, pity and patience that I would cheerfully grant a sick friend.

What does this look like? When we have gone through this, how are we different? What does success look like, when we have let go of our resentments?

We have had, in the case of Larry Nassar, the doctor who abused many gymnasts, two examples of reactions at his trial. The first that I will mention is Randall Margraves. Randall Margraves’ three daughters were abused by Larry Nassar. When he spoke to the judge at the sentencing hearing, he asked her [the judge] to let him spend five minutes in a room with him. When the judge said, “no” to that, he asked for one minute; and, when she said, “no” to that, he charged him [Nassar] across the court room, to try and get to him.

I had a friend who said of this, “I can’t quite call it the right thing to do, but I can’t quite call it the wrong thing to do either.” Somehow, we have a sense of empathy for that father. That father had been hurt in a way that we can’t even imagine, and his sense of righteous

anger must have been enormous. His desire to protect his children must have been incredible.

But we see a contrasting example of someone who, though she had also been hurt, had let go of her resentment. She was no longer owned by this anger. And I would say of this father, as much as we might sympathize with him when he charged Larry Nassar, his daughters were terrified. They cried out in terror that he was doing that. It wasn't what they wanted from him.

One of the most remarkable characters that I have seen in a very long time was also at that trial. Rachel Denhollander was the last of 156 victims to make a statement against the now sentenced sexual abuser, former USA Gymnastics Doctor Larry Nassar. Rachel Denhollander was the first person to come forward when no one had yet come forward against him, and after she came forward 156 others came. But she was able to make this statement: "Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. That is what makes the Gospel of Christ so sweet; because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. It will be there for you. I pray you experience the soul-crushing weight of guilt, so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me, though I extend that to you as well."

It was an incredible moment. It was someone who had fully held this abuser accountable, but had been released from anger. She was able to extend forgiveness even though her abuser had never truly admitted the weight of his guilt.

So, what does this parable call us to? This parable calls us to forgive one another as God has forgiven us; and, we have been forgiven by God, as those who God forgave long before we had any awareness of our sin, of our brokenness, of what we had done against God. So, we, too, are called to forgive one another, when we forgive those who have not yet admitted wrong. It may not be so much for them as for us. For when we lay down these resentments, we have spiritual freedom. We are released from an anger that can drive us, and hold us, and block us from being used by God. Amen.