

3. CAN WE REALLY FORGIVE WHEN WE ARE STILL HURTING AND GRIEVING?

"Healing The Wounds of The Heart: How To Really Forgive"

Thursdays Online Lent Conversations with Fr Luigi Gioia, Theologian in Residence¹, on the book by Timothy Keller, Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I? ²

Real forgiveness requires time, prayer, imagination, wisdom, and the support of a loving community deeply committed to the promotion of justice. Nobody should judge anyone's effort to deal with hurt, injustice, and the evil we suffer in our lives. There is no simple recipe for forgiveness. Forgiving too quickly and without taking enough time for internal (included 'therapeutical') healing can cause more harm than good, empower perpetrators, and perpetuate injustice.

Some passage from Keller's book

1. Forgiveness means that, when you want to make the wrongdoer suffer, instead you refuse to do it. And this refusal is hard. It is difficult and costly, but through it you are absorbing the debt yourself. (9)
2. If you don't forgive the person, your justice seeking will likely veer into the territory of revenge. (9)
 - 2.1. The self-centeredness that grows when you stay angry at somebody, when you hold things against them, when you continue to regard them as if they're liable to you and they owe you, is a prison. (13)
 - 2.2. You will actually give him power over you. (14)
3. We don't forgive through trying harder or appeals to social benefits or self-interest. (14)
4. What [the secular models of forgiveness – therapeutical, transactional, and no-forgiveness] have in common is the lack of any vertical dimension. They all contrast with the costly grace model of forgiveness assumed in the Bible, which has both a horizontal and vertical dimension to it. (28)

a. _____

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² Timothy Keller (1950-2023) was the one of the most influential evangelical thinkers of our time and the long time pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. A gifted and influential communicator, he also was a prolific writer, and his book *The Reason For God* reached No. 7 on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller. Although a conservative evangelical notably opposed to LGBTQ inclusion, he rejected culture-war antagonism, was committed to social justice, and was widely admired even by those who disagreed with him for his graciousness and his genuine effort to listen to others. You can watch this YouTube video on the book <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qsl3hwGkCk>.

5. There are three basic dimensions to Christian forgiveness.
 - 5.1. First there is the vertical—God’s forgiveness to us.
 - 5.2. Second there is the internal—our granting forgiveness to anyone who has wronged us.
 - 5.3. Third there is the horizontal—our offer to reconcile. The horizontal is based on the internal, and the internal is based on the vertical. (10)

A more in-depth look into the ‘vertical’ and community dimensions of forgiveness

6. There are two possible reactions to the radical nature of Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness.
 - 6.1. The first is to consider it hyperbole, a rhetorical exaggeration: Jesus does not *really* expect us to turn the other cheek or to give away our shirt along with our coat (cf. Luke 6:29). An exaggeration like this would be typical of the Semitic language, as when Jesus says, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away” (Matt 5:29; 18:9).
 - 6.2. The other reaction is to consider the teaching on forgiveness a simple moral rule: Jesus says that I must forgive my enemies and love them, so I just have to do it. If I haven’t succeeded so far, if I couldn’t forgive, it’s because I haven’t tried hard enough or haven’t really wanted to. Both these ways of understanding the Gospel are wrong.
7. First, we know that these words of the Gospel are not an exaggeration for a very simple reason: Jesus’ own example.
 - 7.1. Jesus never took an eye, nor did he ever ask anyone else to—that one really is a rhetorical exaggeration.
 - 7.2. But in the case of forgiveness, Jesus really did not resist those who arrested, tortured, and murdered him.
 - 7.3. He continued to love Judas and washed his feet during the Last Supper, gave his life for him, presented his cheek to the kiss of betrayal, did not react, continued to offer his face to those who slapped it.
 - 7.4. He gave no answer to those who dragged him to court, did not defend himself, knowing that they were not looking for the truth and that it was useless to speak.
 - 7.5. On the cross he prayed for those who were killing him and sought for them the Father’s forgiveness: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).
 - 7.6. So Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness is no rhetorical exaggeration. His own example makes clear that he means it literally.
8. But just as mistaken would be a purely moralistic interpretation that would make forgiveness simply a question of following a rule, a choice we make.
 - 8.1. This interpretation is wrong because it is impossible to forgive.
 - 8.2. The best we’re able to do is to pretend to forget about what has hurt us.
 - 8.3. But that is not really forgiveness, because hostility, anger, and resentment remain under a false facade, and if we peel away some of the new paint, the old grudges and resentments are still there, just as real and just as strong.
 - 8.4. Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness is much more than just a moral rule.

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9. If we truly reflect on this teaching, we will come to understand that forgiveness is possible only in a circumstance that we allow to develop slowly, patiently, diligently. And this approach has two main characteristics.
 - 9.1. First, our hearts become capable of forgiving only if, rather than closing ourselves up in ourselves, we raise our eyes to meet the eyes of our Father who is in heaven.
 - 9.2. Second, forgiveness develops and thrives only in the context of a community of solidarity and only if we consider it to be a shared responsibility.
 - 9.3. Let's examine these two aspects more closely.
10. In the first place, the failure to forgive is a result of self-isolation. This is particularly evident in the story of the first murder, that of Cain killing Abel.
 - 10.1. We read in the book of Genesis that because the Lord did not look with favor on Cain's offering,

“Cain was very angry and dejected. Then the LORD said to Cain: Why are you angry? Why are you dejected? If you act rightly, you will be accepted; but if not, sin lies in wait at the door: its urge is for you, yet you can rule over it” (Gen 4:6-7).
 - 10.2. The Hebrew word that is translated here as *dejected* literally means “his face was turned down.”
 - 10.3. The hatred, the resentment, the desire for revenge are manifested through a downturned face, a look that avoids that of God, a refusal to meet God's eyes.
 - 10.4. If we listen to the monologue of resentment, bitterness, hatred, and desire for revenge that occupies our minds sometimes for entire days, we will always find ourselves muttering things like “I can't let anyone do this to me,” “I refuse to be treated like this,” “I must defend my reputation,” and so on.
 - 10.5. The truth is that bitterness, animosity, resentment, and the desire for revenge are not natural feelings for us. These negative feelings are foreign to our hearts and our spirits – they can grow and end up determining our behavior only if we nurture them, only if we constantly blow on them like the embers of a fire that we want to keep burning.
11. This is why Scripture says,

“Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your own people” (Lev 19:18)

 - 11.1. The dynamic of revenge requires a cold and blind deliberation nurtured over time. It requires perseverance in evil.
 - 11.2. I begin by closing myself in upon myself; then I keep telling myself that I cannot afford to be humiliated in this way; then I let the initial pain and resentment, which were basically manageable, grow and evolve into open hostility; then I fall prey to bitterness, then to frustration, and finally to a hate that is thirsty for satisfaction and revenge.
12. We mustn't try to justify animosity, resentment, or revenge by attributing them to our survival instinct, as if they were simply methods of self-defense.
 - 12.1. Of course, when we feel our lives are in danger, we defend ourselves.
 - 12.2. In extreme situations, self-defense can justify the physical disabling of those who want to hurt us. This legitimizes the exercise of retributive justice in society.

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- 12.3. But for it to be an authentic form of *justice*, it must never be motivated by resentment, hatred, or, worse, the desire for revenge.
- 12.4. To remain just, it must be objective; it must simply protect, repair the wrong, and strive to rehabilitate those who have done evil.
- 12.5. Jesus himself acted in this way—he warned us against sin, but he wants us not to abandon the sinner. Or rather, he warned us against sin in order to lead sinners to repentance.
- 12.6. Resentment and bitterness, not to mention hatred and revenge, can never pretend to be forms of the instinct for self-preservation or self-defense. They can never be considered expressions of justice.
- 12.7. On the contrary, they are forms of a pride well illustrated by Lamech’s chilling threat in the fourth chapter of the book of Genesis:
“I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for bruising me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times” (Gen 4:23-24).
- 12.8. What worse form of pride is there than boasting of hatred, reducing the other persons to the evil they have done to me, refusing to acknowledge that fault and responsibility are almost never one-sided?
- 12.9. The dynamics of resentment and bitterness that lead to hatred are forms of insanity. They “corrode” us inside, imprison us in paranoia. It is no coincidence that we speak of “blinding hatred.”
- 12.10. Hence the impossibility to truly forgive without first having been cured of our blindness, helped to overcome our self-isolation, and freed from our pride.
13. This is why we are not able to offer real forgiveness with a simple act of will, but only through a patient and sometimes long process.
- 13.1. Scripture teaches us a lot in this regard, for example, in the way God treats Cain.
- 13.2. God does not confront Cain by immediately ordering him to forgive Abel. First, he invites Cain to re-establish the dialogue with the Father, with the Lord, to turn to him:
“Why are you angry? Why are you dejected [literally, why is your face turned down]?” (Gen 4:6).
- 13.3. We could interpret this as an invitation to pray, parallel to that of Jesus’ “Pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44).
- 13.4. God invites Cain, as Jesus invites each of us, to look upwards: “Don’t look at the ground—lift your eyes, look me in the eyes!”
- 13.5. In the Gospel of Matthew, the process of forgiveness begins by looking to the Father who “makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust” (Matt 5:45).
- 13.6. Only the Lord, the Father “pardons all your sins, / and heals all your ills” (Ps 103:3), as the psalm says, and of what more serious illness do we need to be healed than the pride, resentment, and animosity that grips our hearts?
14. Anyone who has received the grace of authentic forgiveness knows that it is like a knot that is suddenly untied, a rock removed from our heart.
- 14.1. It is not by chance that liberation from bitterness and resentment is often accompanied by tears—not tears of pain, but of liberation and joy.

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- 14.2. The first phase in the process of forgiveness, then, is to be torn from closure upon ourselves, from isolation, from separation from God and from others.
15. There is a second decisive phase in this process, which the Gospel suggests through a detail that is easily missed, especially in English.
- 15.1. When Jesus speaks of the process of forgiveness, he alternates between the second person singular (“you” addressed to one person) and second person plural (“you” addressed to more than one person, to a group).
- 15.2. When he says,
“I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles” (Matt 5:39-41),
- 15.3. in each case, he speaks in the second person singular.
- 15.4. But then in the following sentences, he speaks in the second person plural when he says,
“I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. . . . Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:44,48).
- 15.5. This suggests that forgiveness is possible only within a community, only with the help and support of a community.
- 15.6. Forgiveness depends not only or even principally on an isolated “I,” but also on a “we.”
- 15.7. It is something that can blossom and grow only within a community where love and forgiveness are cultivated.
16. This confirms what we said above: resentment, revenge, and hatred are always expressions of the rejection of our solidarity with others—I no longer want to consider others my sisters or brothers; it is easier to reduce them to whatever evil they did to me.
- 16.1. I find strange that a person for whom I feel only dislike and animosity is respected and loved by other people.
- 16.2. This is the result of the blindness caused by hostility—I see my sister or brother only as a threat to me.
- 16.3. Hatred, resentment, and revenge thrive in a society of competing individuals. And this is why the most frequent areas of conflict are sexuality and work, where competition dominates, where the advantage of one is too often understood to come at the expense of another.
- 16.4. But forgiveness flourishes in a community of brothers and sisters who strive to live in solidarity and shared responsibility, in which relationships are not guided by sexual instinct or competition, but where the good of the other also becomes my good, where I can find joy in the well-being and success of others.
- 16.5. Forgiveness can flourish only where there is dialogue and mutual help.
17. It is inevitable that in every community, every family, and every professional relationship, misunderstandings, hostilities, jealousies, and passions arise.
- 17.1. But thanks be to God, they do not affect everyone at the same time and with the same intensity.

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- 17.2. They are not normally all oriented towards the same people, and they do not arise in everyone for the same reasons.
- 17.3. Thus it is possible to help each other forgive.
18. This is the context in which to practice the wonderful beatitude,
“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9),
- 18.1. which could be rephrased as “Blessed are the facilitators of forgiveness.”
- 18.2. We are all called to be peacemakers in this way.
- 18.3. We must all strive to promote forgiveness so that as soon as we detect seeds of misunderstanding or jealousy, or we perceive grudges or resentments, we avoid throwing fuel on the fire through gossip or siding with one or the other.
- 18.4. On the contrary, with discretion and patience, without any form of paternalism, we must all commit ourselves to healing wounds, reconciling enemies, correcting those who seem to be wrong, mediating conflicts.
19. It is no coincidence that there is such a close relationship between the beatitude on peacemaking and Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness.
- 19.1. After all, he teaches that peacemakers are blessed because “they will be called children of God”
- 19.2. and, later in the same discourse, that we must love our enemies and pray for them “that you may be children of your heavenly Father.”
- 19.3. In both cases these behaviors are a privileged expression of being children of the Father.
20. For this reason, forgiveness is not and cannot be a mere question of will.
- 20.1. It must be recognized as a process that requires a common strategy, imagination, intelligence, and diplomacy,
- 20.2. and it prospers only if we feel truly in solidarity with one another, if we feel responsible for one another.
21. That’s why we must never be discouraged when we experience our inability to forgive.
- 21.1. The Lord has not told us that it is a simple thing or a quick process.
- 21.2. Forgiveness must be built day after day and, paradoxically, we achieve it not by trying to force ourselves to forgive at all costs, but above all by committing ourselves to act as peacemakers, as nurturers of forgiveness in the communities of which we are a part.
- 21.3. The more I commit myself to help others forgive, the more I can hope that when I need to forgive, I will find at my side a peacemaker who will help me.
22. Just as resentment, bitterness, and hatred lead to pride that isolates us, encloses us in ourselves, blinds us, so forgiveness is built on humility that helps us recognize that we need help.
- 22.1. We need help to forgive; we can’t do it alone.
- 22.2. Forgiveness needs humility that welcomes advice and is ready to ask for it.
- 22.3. When I have trouble forgiving, I have to know how to ask for help.
- 22.4. I have to know how to go to someone who can help me.

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- 22.5.** Forgiveness needs humility that brings peace. We need humility to pray for those who hurt us, and, above all, we need humility to continue to hope against all hope.
- 23.** Forgiveness, then, is not impossible, but that doesn't mean it's as simple as just deciding to forgive.

 - 23.1.** Forgiveness is something we must build, toward which we must work with patience, and that flourishes only if we live the spirit of the beatitudes as a community: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt 5:9).