

REFLECTION FORGIVENESS 17th SEPTEMBER 2023

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Forgiveness is a concept that has been drilled into us as Christians that unless you are able to forgive those who sin against us, we will not be honouring what it means to be a true and faithful Christian. No matter how bad the crime big or small being able to offer forgiveness is the good Christian thing to do.

I remember when I was 5 years old in primary school, at Sunday school mum and dad usually gave us all a halfpenny each to put in the Sunday school offering plate. One Sunday, she gave me a penny so when the offering plate came around, I put in the penny and took out a halfpenny. Straight after church I went next door to the petrol station and bought a stick of candy with the change. Even at the time of committing this act I had a guilty feeling that it was wrong to take money out of the offering plate. I remember returning to that little church as recently as 2014, completely different church and people but when the offering came around, I put in a big donation. It might have taken 50 years to reconcile myself, but I really needed to do this. It's never too late to make amends for things that happened many, many years ago. It wasn't really that major but for me I often thought of that incident and knew that one day I would correct that misdemeanour one day.

Take it or leave it, I was once told by a family psychotherapist that there are far less Catholics who suffer from mental illness than non-Catholics and that's because they are able to go and confess in the confessional with a priest and seek forgiveness. Everyone needs an opportunity to off-load otherwise it will keep on eating away at your conscience.

In Samoa the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation has always existed in the form of "ifoga" even before the arrival of Christianity. Ifoga is to humble oneself and offer one's life and livelihood to the family who have been wronged or victimised. When someone commits a crime the whole family and the whole village is involved in correcting that wrong. Ifoga is Samoa's attempt at restorative justice that those wronged or injured are given the opportunity to seek restitution, restoration, and justice. Reconciliation may eventuate but will only come with healing over time. A contextual Christology reminds us that the Samoan practice of ifoga was and continues to be a good thing. They were practicing forgiveness and reconciliation in their own way well before the arrival of the Gospel in Samoa. You may remember in 2021 the then Prime minister the Honourable Jacinda Ardern being covered with the fine mat, which was eventually lifted by members of the Pacific community.

How many times must we forgive one another? Is once enough? We are challenged by the Gospel to forgive 70 x 7 another way of saying infinity. Forgiveness is not a matter of lip service it has to be real and genuine and sincere. The term metanoia is about true repentance and that the perpetrator must be truly repentant that they need to come face to face with the person they have wronged. Forgiveness must be transformative and the result of a genuine apology that one is truly sorry and seeks to be forgiven in order for restoration to take place..

Trish McBride in her book *A Love Qulit* offers some excellent insight and experience from her years of working as a spiritual director, counsellor, chaplain in mental health and former Women's Refuge educator. She asked the question "To whom was Jesus speaking to when urging forgiveness? Very likely to men

who had been brought up with 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', which itself was a development from the unrestrained revenge of earlier times. Certainly not to battered women!

She continues, When does repeated forgiveness become collusion? Some Christians find it very easy to resort to a literal understanding of the Gospel text: 'Jesus said just keep on forgiving'. We live in different days now, with different understandings of the complexities of human behaviour and the effects of trauma. Power issues around forgiveness: the story Jesus told were more about the powerful forgiving the less powerful, than about powerless victims forgiving powerful perpetrators.

As I mentioned in my E News this week, I encountered, or should I say was confronted with a question about forgiveness and I wonder whether you have been asked the same in your own lifetime. "Have you forgiven them for what they have done?" I want you to think of a time when you might have been asked this question. How do you answer this type of question? In fact, why is this person asking the question in the first place, what business is it of theirs? How does the person asking the question benefit from your answer? If you answer "no" you could be accused that that therefore is the reason why you have present difficulties in your life, is because your inability to forgive is cursing you! As a result, we might believe that tragedy and disappointment is a result of having not forgiven someone in our past. Christian forgiveness has a lot to answer for the tremendous burden of guilt people carry because they feel they have to forgive because Jesus says to do this 70 x 7 times. This Gospel imperative needs to be put in the context of the person who has been wronged.

Some crimes are unforgiveable, and one cannot be forced to forgive for the sake of Gospel or because Jesus said so.

I struggle with this. Firstly, because forgiveness is something private and personal. It does not have to be a dramatic theatrical affair involving whole villages and courts as in the “ifoga”. Forgiveness is something that we know within ourselves has taken place. Forgiveness is about integrity and when one has committed a wrong against a fellow human being admitting it and being prepared to restore that individual back to a positive place in society is what God requires of us. We as human beings if we have a conscience know the truth and the truth will set us free. To carry an untruth with you to the grave will be your life’s burden at the end of the day, it may prove too heavy for you to carry.

In our Old Testament reading this morning Joseph forgives his brothers for selling him as a slave to Egyptians. Even in their act of jealousy and cruelty God turned Joseph’s tragedy into an opportunity for Joseph to become the reconciler and the forgiver. From a pastoral perspective this act by Joseph is about remembering God’s presence in the midst of the struggles we experience, that God had a plan and a purpose for Joseph, could that also be true of us? For me forgiveness as a Christian means that God will stay with me until justice prevails no matter how long it may take.

The call for us as the church of God is to remind one another that God by many names is with us in the midst of our trauma and grief no matter where we are – whether that be family dynamics that steal our energy, or living in a dysfunctional relationship, or having a debilitating disease or medical condition and many other struggles we encounter in life. The God who appears through

Joseph to the brothers in the form of forgiveness and reconciliation is the same God who is present with us as we are confronted with injustice and oppression. This is the God who moves with us as we journey from something we know toward something that is unknown. For each one of us, we are also compelled to place our trust in the wholly other some name God who journeys with us through the deserts of our lives into places of hope and promise.

Affirming the presence of God in the midst of our physical, spiritual and emotion is part of our mission for those of us who are called to be the church. Much like Moses, the church is called to act on behalf of a community of people who feel powerless in the face of systems and structures they experience as powerful and challenging. God calls us to be advocates and spokespersons for those whose voices have been silenced or for those who become lost in the webs of powerlessness.

Forgiveness is relational. Too often we are reduced to 'sorry' without restoration, sorry without reconciliation, sorry without metanoia. Forgiveness is costly. It is costly to the one who forgives because it is giving up something. It is also costly to the one forgiven. It is costly because it entails acknowledging the need for restoring the person who has been wronged to a place and position of restoration and transformation. It means allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, allowing ourselves to be loved. It means facing up to oneself.

I want to conclude with another quote from Trish McBride's book slightly paraphrased. What would the loving , compassionate Holy One want for us? And what will actually promote healing? Are keys to creating a safe healing space for damaged people? So that they are more able eventually to move past

the pain and find the wholeness, freedom and joy that is their human spiritual birthright.

Simply put for me, Forgiveness and being forgiven is about grace given and received as the basis for true repentance, metanoia, justice, reconciliation, and restoration. Without any of these things it means nothing. *Amen.*