

FORGIVING OTHERS, FORGIVING OURSELVES

The Rev. Suzanne Spencer
UU Congregation of Danbury
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The Black Angel, a play by Michael Christofer, tells the story of Herman Engel, a Nazi general in World War II. As the play begins, Engel has just been released from prison, having completed the 30-year sentence imposed by the Nuremberg Tribunal.ⁱ Now that he has served his time, Engel hopes to build a new life. He and his wife have gone to Alsace, on the French-German border. There they have built a woodland cabin, where they hope to live out their years, at peace and unrecognized.

They have not counted on Morrieaux. Morrieaux is a French journalist whose family was massacred by Engel's army. When the Nuremberg court failed to sentence Engel to death, Morrieaux vowed to do it himself, no matter how long it might take to accomplish, no matter how long he might have to wait. Now the time is ripe. He's found the hiding place, and has stirred up some old partisans in the village. That very night, they are going to enter the woods, burn down the cabin, and kill Engel and his wife.

Before this happens, however, Morrieaux wants to do one thing. He wants to talk to Engel. There are still some gaps in the story that his journalist's mind wants to resolve. And so he goes to the cabin, confronts a very shaken Engel, and spends the afternoon grilling him.

It turns out he's confused by the interview. He'd come expecting to find a monster, but instead finds a feeble old man. Not only that, but he's having trouble piecing the story together. There are gaps – doubt creeps into his mind. His hatred, clear and bright for so long, now begins to grow fuzzy around the edges. And so, as the sun is setting, Morrieaux finds himself doing the unexpected. He blurts out to his adversary, "The villagers are coming! They plan to kill you tonight!" And then, "But it doesn't have to happen – I will lead you out of the woods and save your life!"

Engel pauses for a moment. In the course of the interview, he's begun to have some doubts of his own. Finally he says, "Okay, I'll go with you – on one condition." And what condition would a man impose for the saving of his own life? "I'll go with you – but only if you forgive me."

Forgive? In his fantasies, Morrieaux has killed Engel thousands of times. Now, after an afternoon's encounter with the man's humanity, he's prepared to call it off. He's prepared to save the life of his enemy. But forgive him? No. Never.

Thus Engel stays right where he is, and that night everything goes according to plan. Villagers appear with sacks over their heads. They burn the cabin down, and shoot Engel and his wife dead.

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Why is forgiveness so important – and so difficult? Here we have one man who'd rather die than go on living unforgiven. And we have another, fully prepared to call off an assassination, but unable to cancel the hatred in his heart. Admittedly, this story describes an extreme case. But I'm guessing it may speak to our condition.

How many times have we heard the phrase “forgive and forget?” Hundreds of times? Thousands? It trips off the tongue so easily. Yet we know how hard it is to do. At least *I* know it's hard. Nothing in my life compares to the horror of Nazi Germany. And yet, I know how the hurts pile up over time. If I allow myself to think about it, the landscape of my life is littered with unforgiven people – including some I thought I'd forgotten. When I realize this, I know I have a problem. Each unforgiven person is a hurt still alive. Each hurt is a barrier in my heart. And each barrier is a block to my own healing and wholeness.

How do we get past the barriers? I won't pretend that it's easy. At the same time, there's often some confusion around the topic, a lack of clarity – and this makes forgiveness more difficult than it needs to be. There's a lot of baggage associated with forgiveness. If we unpack some of it, maybe we can come to new understanding.

Let's start by listing what forgiveness is *not* – and in the process dismiss some conventional wisdom:

First, forgiveness can never be an obligation. It should never be a “should.”

Marie Fortune is a United Church of Christ minister who counsels victims of domestic and sexual abuse. She confesses that, once in a while, she gets tired of hearing a victim's story. At that point, she's tempted to ask, “Isn't it time that you forgave him?”

But she knows that forgiveness has to be on the *victim's* timetable. It can't be on the timetable of the counselor, or the perpetrator, or well-meaning friends. Forced forgiveness accomplishes nothing, except to perpetuate the abuse.

Second, forgiving is not forgetting, despite the well-known phrase. Sometimes forgiving will release us, and free us to forget. But the two are not the same.

Forgetting can even get in the way of forgiving. You know that, if you've ever had a hurtful experience suddenly rise to the surface full force. It's a sure sign that the wound, covered over, is still alive. If that happens, then healing calls first for remembrance, or “de-forgetting,” to translate the Greek word *anamnesis*. Stephen Levine, a Buddhist teacher, says that we can't forgive anything until we've “touched it with a clear awareness.”

Forgiveness is also not “excusing.” It's not a matter of letting someone off the hook. It is not saying, “oh, that's okay.” By definition, anything that's okay doesn't need to be forgiven! There are lighter words for the things that are easy to let go of – words like “apologize” or “excuse.” Forgiveness should be saved for the big stuff – the stuff that is “unforgivable.”

Finally, forgiveness is not the opposite of justice. True, there's a thing called grace – and grace makes anything possible. But in the normal course, true forgiveness can't happen unless justice first paves the way. In South Africa, for example, it's hard to imagine the Truth and Reconciliation Commission going forward until apartheid had ended.

So – if forgiving is not forgetting, or excusing, what is it? If it's a free act, not an obligation, why do it? There are at least three good reasons, I think.

First of all, forgiving is freedom. I'll never forget a homily preached by Krister Stendahl, former dean of Harvard Divinity School. Krister had a way of delivering little diamonds of wisdom with a twinkle in his eye.

One Friday morning, at 8 a.m., he woke us all up with this little gem: “We tend to think of forgiveness as something nice, to make us feel all warm and cozy inside. But forgiveness is nothing but a little gate, really – a gate through which we walk into freedom.”

Forgiveness is freedom. Freedom for the forgiven one, but also for the forgiver. Maybe especially for the forgiver. Think what happens when we've been wounded, and unable to forgive. The hurt lodges in our heart. Our mind plays it over and over. And thus a piece of us is nailed to a moment in the past. It becomes frozen and imprisoned. Finding a way to forgive stops that cycle. It opens the prison door and let's us walk into the fresh air.

Forgiving is freedom. It's also a creative act. This insight comes from Lewis Smedes, an evangelical preacher from California. Let's face it, blame and recrimination are the very opposite of creativity. They're repetitious and unimaginative – boring, quite frankly. They move us downward in a self-defeating spiral. In the midst of this, forgiveness is a daring act – it breaks us out of the spiral, and lets us soar again.

The third reason to forgive may be the most important. **When we forgive others, we make it possible to forgive ourselves, as well.**

I'm guessing that most of us are harder on ourselves than we are on others. Behind our anger at another person, there may lurk deep anger at ourselves: “How could I have been so dumb as to let that happen?” we may ask ourselves. Or, “why did I put up with that for so long?” When we forgive, we allow the other to be a flawed human being. And we give ourselves permission to be the same.

Oscar Wilde, writing from prison, sums up all the reasons to forgive – for our own sake as well as the sake of the other. Here's what he says to the lover who betrayed him:

At the end of it all is that I have got to forgive you. I must do so. I don't write this letter to put bitterness in your heart, but to pluck it out of mine. For my own sake I just forgive you. One cannot always keep an adder in one's breast to feed on one, nor rise up every night to sow thorns in the garden of one's soul.ⁱⁱ

But how do we go about forgiving? Lewis Smedes suggests a relational process, one that takes place in four movements: We hurt. We hate. We heal ourselves. We reconcile.

The first two movements, hurting and hating, set the stage. We allow the full force of our feelings, and know them in the depths of our being. We name what was done to us – and we say that it was wrong. Maybe we cry. Maybe we cry a lot. As we do this, we may discover that our armor softens. Even if what the person did to us was unforgivable, we may stop demonizing him or her. We may see this person in their full humanity – weak, needy, and fallible, like ourselves.

This may be enough. It may in itself bring the release we need. It may allow us to get on with our lives. But we may want to take just one more step – we may want to go to that person and reconcile. That means confronting the other with our honest feelings – easier said than done. What makes it harder is that the other must be ready to receive us – must hear us out, must be ready to acknowledge our pain.

Furthermore, the other must also be willing to repent. What constitutes repentance? Sometimes all it takes is a simple “I’m sorry.” But more may be required. The other may need to offer restitution, to make amends – or at least to promise, “I won’t do it again.” In other words, the “I’m sorry” must become visible in action – and good for the future.

But what if the other person isn’t available? What if he or she is long gone, what if they’ve been dead for years? Is reconciliation possible even then? It may be more possible than we think. “The empty chair” is a powerful tool in a psychotherapist’s office. We can still carry on verbal conversations with those long gone, or written ones through journaling. And reconciliation may be possible in our dreams.

Another thing we can do is to pray. That is, we can put a request out to God, or to the universe, or to our own unconscious: “I want to forgive this person, but I can’t. Can you help me?” And we may discover that grace takes over, and releases us. It may happen little by little, over time. Or it may happen all at once.

November 2 is “All Soul’s Day,” the “Day of the Dead.” It may bring up happy memories, or hurtful ones, or a mingling of emotions. It is a tender time – and I wish for you some healing, some lightening of the load you carry. May you find some measure of reconciliation, with someone from whom you are estranged. May you take one small step toward forgiving another – which is a step toward healing yourself, and this community, and even our beloved, broken world.

ⁱ I’m grateful to Lewis Smedes for sparking many of the thoughts in this sermon, and also for calling my attention to *The Black Angel* through his book *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve* (San Francisco: Harper Paperback, 1996).

ⁱⁱ “De Profundis,” *The Portable Oscar Wilde*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1957), 578-79.