

Reflection on Forgiveness. By Deacon Charlie

Why is it so difficult to forgive? And why it is the best for us! This past week we had the passage where Jesus tells us to forgive seventy times seven. But it is a struggle for us, especially if the person who did us wrong is not remorseful. Who hasn't been hurt by the actions or words of another? Perhaps a parent constantly criticized you growing up, a colleague sabotaged a project or your partner had an affair. Or maybe you've had a traumatic experience, such as being physically or emotionally abused by someone close to you. These wounds can leave you with lasting feelings of anger and bitterness — even vengeance.

Forgiveness is not just about saying the words. It is an active process in which you make a conscious decision to let go of negative feelings whether the person deserves it or not. As you release the anger, resentment and hostility, you begin to feel empathy, compassion and sometimes even affection for the person who wronged you. By embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting or excusing the harm done to you or making up with the person who caused the harm. Forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life.

Simply forgiving someone because you think you have no other alternative or because you think God requires it may be enough to bring some healing. But one study found that people whose forgiveness came in part from understanding that no one is perfect were able to resume a normal relationship with the other person, even if that person never apologized. Getting another person to change his or her actions, behavior or words isn't the point of forgiveness. Think of forgiveness more about how it can change your life - by bringing you peace, happiness, and emotional and spiritual healing.

There is a tremendous shift of consciousness required if one is to be a Christian. It is realizing that your life is not about you. In the deepest sense, we don't belong to ourselves. Everything we have and all that we are comes from God. We are meant, with all of our gifts, to serve God's purposes.

Our very existence comes from God, but so does the forgiveness of our sins. If there is one thing that we can each claim of ourselves, it is that we are often cruel, vindictive, violent, insensitive, and self-absorbed.

The upshot is this: there is nothing particularly stable about the self, nothing that it can claim for its own. All that it is, we received as a gift. What is at the root of the inability to forgive but this false sense of the substantial self?

You exist because of God and in order to serve the purposes of God. How often do you forgive your neighbor? Seven times? No, I tell you seventy times seven times. In other words, endlessly, constantly, without calculation.

"A man cannot forgive up to four hundred and ninety times without forgiveness becoming part of the habit structure of his being. Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude."
Rev. Martin Luther King Junior.

Reflection: Think of the last time you had difficulty forgiving someone. How did your sense of your own "substantial self" make you hesitant to forgive?

