

### Remembering Brother Bob

Tell me, you years I had for my life,  
tell me a day, that day it snowed  
and I played hockey in the cold.  
Bob was seven, then, and I was twelve,  
and strong. The sun went down. I turned  
and Bob was crying on the shore.

Do I remember kindness? Did I  
shield my brother, comfort him?  
Tell me, you years I had for my life.

Yes, I carried him. I took  
him home. But I complained. I see  
the darkness; it comes near: and Bob,  
who is gone now, and the other kids.  
I am the zero in the scene:  
“You said you would be brave,” I chided  
him. “I’ll not take you again.”  
Years, I look at the white across  
this page, and think: I never did.

*William Stafford (1914 – 1993)*

### Forgiveness is...

- When hurt, insult, and injustice are not revenged, but good is returned for evil.
- Freedom from past offense and sustaining new relations with one’s fallible fellow-beings; the offense no longer conditions the relationship
- Not simply forgoing punishment, which can also arise from carelessness about justice or a lack of power to punish
- Pardon for guilt embodies a refusal to let the wrong done determine the future freedom of the wrongdoer
- Not purely spiritual, but operates in social and economic practicalities. Where the mechanisms and morality of society insist that debtors must fulfill their obligations to the last farthing, the poor will be enslaved and crushed. Forgiveness / relief of debts expressed as jubilee.
- Forgiving liberates from the past, but is not merely forgetting. It is a way of reckoning truthfully with what is wrong and hence is a way of remembering in which the past is not denied but deprived of its power to shape the future.
- Wrong is remembered but no longer sets the agenda for the future or consumes people’s lives. It is a remembering which enables the transformation of the past so that it no longer destroys joy, peace, and love. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, restorative justice

- Forgiveness is the restoration of a free spirit in relation to God and conscience (Psalm 51:10)
- Sometimes repentance precedes forgiveness, but not always. Forgiveness is a costly initiative creating a new undeserved opportunity for the wrongdoer; repentance then occurs when the wrongdoer goes through the door opened by forgiveness. (This is how God manages to work with humans!)

## Forgiveness in the OT

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. – *Jeremiah 31:33-34*

- An appeal to God for forgiveness is a regular feature of intercessory prayer.
- Moses describes the character of God as merciful and willing to forgive (Exodus 34:6-9, Numbers 14:18).
- Turning from sin and divine mercy are associated with forgiveness in Solomon’s prayer (1 Kings 8:30-50)
- Daniel calls on God’s mercy for the forgiveness of the people (Daniel 9)
- Worship of foreign gods jeopardizes the possibility of forgiveness (Jer 5, Deut 29:19, 2 Kings 24:4)

## Images for forgiveness in the OT

- God forgives the sinner by *taking away* human sin: God forbears to punish, postponing or deferring the consequences of sin. This is provoked by repentance (2 Kings 20:16-19, 22:19-20; Ex 34; Ps 25, 85; Isaiah 33:24, Micah 7:18). Within this category falls the instance of the scapegoat who bears away the iniquity of the people (Lev 16:22).
- *Forgiveness and healing* are paired, reflecting common biblical view of a connection between sin and sickness (Ps 38:4, 103:3, 41:5, 107:20, 147:3; 2 Chron 7:14; Jer 3:22; Isa 57:17-18, 53:5; also Jn 9).
- God *not remembering* sin (Jer 31:34; Ps 25:7, 32:2, 79:8; Isa 43:25, 64:8; 1 Sam 19:20)
- Other images: showing mercy, treading iniquities under foot, casting sins into the depths of the sea, purifying /cleansing /washing (connected with cultic rites), erase, wipe away, expiate, atone, make the sin pass by (consequence transferred to another: David’s adultery resulting in the death of his child in 2 Sam 12:13).

## In early Judaism

- Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement) addresses the need for purgation and forgiveness. The nation, the priesthood, and the High Priest were acknowledged to be sinful and in need of God’s forgiveness. The central purpose of forgiveness was for the benefit of the nation and humankind.

## Forgiveness in the NT

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?' But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" —he said to the paralytic— "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

—Mark 2:1-12

- When Jesus forgave the paralytic and was charged with usurping God's place, he responded not by saying he was God, but that authority had been given to the Son of Man to forgive sins on earth (Mark 2:1-10). Jesus was accused of blasphemy because he forgave sins committed against God and not against him personally. The gospels claim for Jesus the right to speak for God on matters of judgment and forgiveness.
- God's forgiveness is enacted humanly. The gospel unites God and humanity in forgiving.

## New Testament imagery and themes of forgiveness

- Jesus evokes the picture of release from debt (*aphesis*)
- Giving freely/showing oneself gracious (*charizomai*), (2 Cor 2:7, 10; Col 3:13)
- Luke's usage evokes loosing from, dismissing, pardoning in 6:37 (*apoluō*)
- The father's eagerness to restore the wayward son in the prodigal son parable (Luke 15:11-32)
- Freedom in God's forgiveness for those yoked by shame from illness or social ostracism (Mk 2:3-4, 15; John 8:11)
- In Luke/Acts, forgiveness of sin is a synonym of salvation (Lk 24:47, Acts 2:38, 5:31, 10:43) and is to be preached and offered in the context of initial conversion to Christ. It's also offered to believers: Jesus taught his disciples to pray daily "forgive us our debts/sins".
- We have a couple of instances of Jesus referring to his own death as a ransom (Mt 20:28/Mk 10:45, Mt 26:28).
- Jesus pardons sins as part of the inbreaking kingdom of God. In establishing the new covenant at the Last Supper, Jesus says: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Mt 26:28)
- Christ portrayed as the ultimate sacrifice and fulfillment of the Mosaic system (Heb 9:22); no longer need for the temple cult.
- "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against him" (2 Cor 5:19). Appeal must be made not simply to God's mercy, but to God's mercy in Christ.

## **Impediments to forgiveness:**

If we have never needed mercy, and do not face our own inherent contradictions, we can go from youth to old age, dualistically locked inside of a mechanistic universe of counting merit and measuring worthiness—at which no one ever wins! That, in my opinion, is the “sin against the Holy Spirit.” Jesus says it “cannot be forgiven” because in that state there is a refusal to even need mercy or forgiveness. “We are doing quite well by ourselves, God, but thanks anyway!” Make sure you are always in need of mercy. My daily attempts at contemplation convince me of that. I never fully succeed at prayer.

– Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, from *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*

- Stubborn unrepentance (Mk 4:12), unbelief (Acts 2:38-40), denial of wrongdoing (1 Jn 1:8-10), refusal to forgive others (Matt 6:14-15).
- An unforgiving spirit is the evidence of stubborn pride, which is not the attitude with which to approach God for mercy.
- “Blasphemy against the Spirit” is noted as a sin that shall not be forgiven (Mt 12:31-32).
- When the offender is unrepentant: Jesus exhorts his followers to love one’s enemies, forego vengeance, and let go of resentment (Mt 5:39; Lk 6:35; Rom 12:14-21). Jesus forgives his own executioners: “Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Lk 23:34)

## **The church and forgiveness<sup>1</sup>**

If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

– *Matthew 5:23-24*

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

– *Matthew 18:21-22*

- The church is a community constituted by the forgiveness of sins, and held together by the practice of forgiveness. As the Lord’s Prayer and parables show: we are forgiven as we forgive (Matt. 18:15-35, 6:12).
- The risen Jesus promises to his disciples, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (Jn 20:23). This is where the church derives authority for confession met with absolution of sins by a priest in the Roman Catholic tradition
- Preaching and giving or withholding baptism become the primary way the church manages the ministry of forgiveness. Differing emphases of baptism (infant vs. believer) point to differing efficacy in removing sins and thereby effecting forgiveness.
- Penance develops to address the problem of post-baptismal sin. Eucharistic emphasis, purgatory, and indulgences focus on hope of forgiveness in the face of final judgment.
- The Reformation emphasizes instead that God’s forgiveness was already accomplished in Christ, and therefore should be a sure foundation for life rather than a hoped-for end.

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<sup>1</sup> Willmer

- Forgiveness by God was most important for final judgment, and forgiveness within human relations was often presented more often as a condition for being forgiven by God than a means of participation in God's forgiveness.
- Forgiveness was long seen as the work of the church, but without a goal of transforming or reordering the world. (Origen's view that even the devil will be finally redeemed by forgiveness is a minority position.)
- Christian thought has been in tension, glorifying the amazing grace of divine forgiveness while being cautious lest justice, virtue, and order are undermined by too much of it. So we compartmentalize: forgiveness is consigned to the relation of persons to God, and to some degree interpersonal relations, but excluded from the methods and responsibilities of social organizations.
- Forgiveness becomes the exception to the rules rather than the essential good which the rules should respect and implement.
- Though it is a human necessity, not a Christian particularity, forgiveness in the west became especially associated with the church and so vulnerable to criticism and marginalization as secularization reduced the church's influence. Science and technology promise order that reduces mistakes and renders forgiveness redundant; revolutionaries were sufficiently confident in their projects as to justify being murderously unforgiving to the old. Late 20<sup>th</sup> century brings renewed openness to forgiving as a practical wisdom for life rather than as religious idealism or sentimentality.
- 21<sup>st</sup> century question: humanity has been able to take for granted the forgivingness of the natural world by its resilient recovery despite aggressive exploitation. Has humanity stretched this to a breaking point? Since Christian thinking is committed to a belief in creation which includes the worth of human beings as the image of God, it cannot be indifferent to humanity's proving to be finally unforgiven. The only way forward is for humans to deliberately share practical responsibility for nurturing and maintaining the forgiveness which sustains our existence.