

Limitless forgiveness

In “Wounded Healer,” Henri Nouwen observes, “Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually.”

Can I get an “amen?” Sometimes people, even those we know best, wound us with unkind words, angry attacks, hurtful actions, spiteful reactions, insensitive comments and other barbs, both big and small. Other times we inflict wounds like these. The healing balm for such wounds and woundedness is *forgiveness*.

Jesus knew that. So when Peter asks him, “How many times must I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answers, “Not seven times but seventy times seven times.”

Peter’s asking if there’s a statute of limitations on forgiveness, and Jesus’ answer isn’t a math problem! It’s hyperbole: he wants Peter and us to hear – loud and clear – that forgiveness should be limitless.

Jesus hammers his point home with a parable. A king graciously forgives one of his slaves ten thousand talents — an *astronomical* debt. The slave then turns around and refuses to forgive a fellow slave. The king is livid at the forgiven slave’s monumental ingratitude.

Tom Long captures the gist of the parable: “[Given] the size of our sinful debt and the immensity of God’s mercy, no one would dare attempt to ration forgiveness. We know too well that the little boat in which we are sailing is floating on a deep sea of grace and that forgiveness is not to be dispensed with an eyedropper, but a fire hose.” *Limitless forgiveness*.

But how do we do that? By heeding Scripture. Praying. Asking the Spirit to help. Miroslav Volf also recommends “unsticking the deed from the doer.” When someone hurts us – especially repeatedly – we tend to merge the doer with the deed(s). To embody fire-hose forgiveness, we must unstick the deed(s) from the doer. I tried this recently. Seeing someone who’d wronged me, I imagined unsticking the deed from her. It worked. My anger melted.

It also helped to see the image of God in her. Volf calls this imago Dei “the core that’s loved by God” with the implication that we should love it, too. That beloved core isn’t sullied by one’s misdeeds. Seeing it can stop us from letting the deed(s) define the doer. But limitless forgiveness is messy at times. We may have to unstick the deed from the doer more than once. And we still need to pray, ask the Spirit to help and take to heart Scripture like the parable of the unforgiving servant.

In “Unconditional?: The Call of Jesus to Radical Forgiveness,” Brian Zahnd tells the story of a Turkish

army officer who led a raid on the home of an Armenian family. The parents were killed and their daughters were raped. The soldiers took the girls; the officer kept the oldest for himself. She eventually escaped and later became a nurse. Assigned to a ward for wounded Turkish army officers, one of her patients was the officer who’d murdered her parents and so horribly abused her and her sisters. As he recovered, the officer recognized her and asked, “Why didn’t you kill me?” She replied, “I am a follower of him who said, ‘Love your enemies.’”

Zahnd writes, “For this Christian, no further explanation was necessary. For her, forgiveness was not an option; it was a requirement.” Limitless forgiveness. I’ll bet that was hard work and a messy process. I’ll bet there was prayer, Scripture, the Spirit at work. Maybe she had to unstick the deed from the doer multiple times. Yet, in a world of wounded people, wide divides (political, etc.) and eyedropper forgiveness, Jesus calls us to a life of limitless forgiveness.

**We know too well that
the little boat in which
we are sailing is floating
on a deep sea of grace
and that forgiveness
is not to be dispensed
with an eyedropper,
but a fire hose.”**

WILLIAM E. W. ROBINSON is the senior pastor and head of staff at First Presbyterian Church on Hilton Head Island in South Carolina and is the author of “Metaphor, Morality, and the Spirit in Romans 8:1-17.”

