The Wisdom of Forgiveness:
Singing Like Birds in the Cage
with Old King Lear

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Forgiveness is at the heart of our Christian faith and of the gospel we live and proclaim. We, as the followers of the Prince of Peace, are called to be a people of forgiveness and reconciliation, Christ’s ambassadors for peace to a fallen world (Matt 5:3–16; 2 Cor 5:12–21). Given the dreadful rise in war, terrorism, and violence all around us today, the issues of forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation are urgent and crucial, both for our world and for Christian leadership. Christians, of course, including those of us who attend worship in our congregations, are also sinners, and thus we will never be able to avoid the tension between our own brokenness and the gospel’s promises. Navigating the powerful forces of sin and evil—in ourselves, the world, and the church—while also remaining true to the word is a challenging, and sometimes perilous, balancing act. Fortunately we stay alive on this high wire not by our wisdom alone but also by the wisdom given us in Scripture and by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Because of these depths and these dangers, however, forgiveness remains a fascinating and profoundly humbling topic for us as Christian ministers and theologians.

Learning to forgive and to be forgiven is a lifelong curriculum from which we never really graduate. Shakespeare’s King Lear can be one guide in this educational process.
Those who teach forgiveness, including the authors of this article, also find the topic captivating, dangerous, and provocative.¹ When we bring up forgiveness in our seminary classrooms, facial expressions become alert, voices gain intensity, and eyes change their focus. It is as though people leave the present and travel back to distant times or places. Parish experiences confirm the volatility of this topic and, not surprisingly, we teachers and preachers become emotionally engaged as well. Since all human stories that center on forgiveness are interwoven with a mixture of successes and difficulties—involving either accepting forgiveness from others or extending forgiveness to those who have hurt us—small wonder that we slip into these involuntary and often painful life-reviews. It only takes a few questions to get us going: Do you think it is necessary to have an apology before forgiving? or, What might be some of the dangers in practicing forgiveness?

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What is less assured, and not at all automatic, is that we arrive at a theologically and psychologically nuanced understanding of our common vocation as a forgiving people. To be called as Christian ministers (leaders and theologians) to practice forgiveness in our own lives and to counsel both the victims and perpetrators of harm, we need wise understandings of this elusive way to live—indeed, we need a wisdom that is beyond our own. We typically begin by trying to understand “human nature,” and even this requires far more than memories of our personal histories. Since no one has ample time to live multiple existences, and since not even the most empathetic counselor can enter fully into the stories of those who come for pastoral care, we must find multiple resources for this first step. Learning more about forgiveness, not only through the academic study of the psychology of forgiveness, but also—perhaps even primarily—through an increased imagination for the human condition, can assist us both in our attempts to live faithfully in a complex world and in our efforts to minister to others.² But this learning comes neither easily nor quickly, even—maybe especially—for Christians.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted, the problem may be that forgiveness can so easily turn into cheap grace: hearing repeated assurances that we are forgiven may lead us to think we know all about how to forgive. We become glib and comfortable, taking the process for granted, thereby cheapening both the power of the gospel for our lives and the costly grace of God.³ Yet at the opposite end of the scale

¹Janet L. Ramsey and Alan G. Padgett team-taught a course on “Forgiveness and Healing” at Luther Seminary in Fall 2005.
²This widened perspective is especially important in helping those victims and perpetrators whose personal, familial, and social locations are radically different from our own.
there are also those Christians who have trouble believing that they can be forgiven at all. They live with a kind of despair, unable to appropriate the story of God’s mercy in a world that, to them, remains dominated by condemnation and law. In contrast to both of these tragic poles is the paradoxical notion that forgiveness is both costly and free. This is the mystery that lies at the very heart of the Christian way of life—one that is actualized in our sacramental life together and in our everyday experiences, as peace becomes part of our lives in both sacred and mundane ways.

Learning to forgive and be forgiven is a challenging process for all people, a lifelong curriculum from which we never really graduate. A quick glance at the evening news is enough to convince anyone that forgiveness remains the most challenging of all human endeavors. And, ironically, learning forgiveness is particularly difficult for persons who want to bring together the word and the world. As Christians we want to learn from and ask questions of (often tragic) human experience, thus remaining relevant and truthful, but we also want to believe the promises of God and employ the resources of our forgiveness-rich faith. Thus we confront an enormous, timeless question: What sort of real, yet spiritual, vision might enable us to forgive? What, at the most profound level, is the place of intersection between Christ’s work on the cross, together with his resurrection, and the estrangement and brokenness in our relationships? Do we have sufficient wisdom to form an integrated, realistic vision of the forgiving life—for ourselves personally, for the people we serve, and for the hurting world?

LEARNING FROM THE TRAGEDY OF KING LEAR

Wise imagination often crosses scientific and artistic boundaries with “its new vision of relations” (Edmund Wilson, 1931), and, as Martin Marty reminded us, Christians have no corner on the history or practice of forgiveness; they “do not believe that they alone experience human—or, for that matter, necessarily divine—forgiveness.” In this article, we will work across the disciplines of literature, the social sciences, and theology to go to school with William Shakespeare. In The Tragedy of King Lear, which he re-created from an earlier play, Shakespeare is a somewhat reluctant teacher. This masterful story, which is often considered Shakespeare’s “Fifth Symphony,” tells of a retiring king and foolish father whose estrangements, brokenness, and reconciliations can broaden and deepen our perceptions of human nature and forgiveness. Few would debate that all of Shake-
Shakespeare’s plays and poetry are rich with wisdom about the human condition, for, as critic Harold Bloom wrote, Shakespeare largely “invented” our understanding of what it means to be a human. But *King Lear*, in particular, reveals the richly shaded complexity that is so often missing in popular language when we speak and write of forgiving and being forgiven. In his wisdom, Shakespeare never preaches and gives no simplistic advice; he does not direct us to forgive. His drama is no morality play with stock characters or a predictable ending, nor does he suggest vindications in the plot or offer portraits of successful revenge. Instead, Shakespeare instructs us—at a decidedly graduate level—by offering us glimpses of the vast complexities of both nature and human nature. He wonders with us what it means to be human, what happenings might drive us to despair, and, finally, how we might experience the radically changed hearts required for a re-pictured world, a world transformed by the very events that threaten to undo us. In *King Lear*, specifically, he allows us to watch as one nearly broken old man experiences a radical shift in perspective, granting us reason and space enough to enlarge our own.

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The outline of the plot is fairly simple, even while the tragedy itself is rich. An aged and powerful king decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, but first demands that they profess their love for him. The two evil sisters (Regan and Goneril) verbosely profess their love for him, but the third sister (Cordelia), who truly loves him, refuses to play the sycophant and speaks of her love quietly and simply: “Good my lord, / You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I / Return those duties back as are right fit, / Obey you, love you, and most honor you” (1.1.97–100). This is inadequate for Lear, who thinks he can command displays of love just as he can lead his knights into battle. At this point in the play, King Lear’s retirement vision is materialistic; his desire for continued admiration, love, and unquestioned authority from his daughters is a sign that he hopes to re-create, in microcosm, the power he previously enjoyed over all his subjects. Cordelia is disinherited and banished. Her two evil sisters inherit the kingdom, but they insult their father and push him out of power; Lear is enraged by their brutal and insensitive
rejection. He then undergoes a process of social and psychological humiliation, a stripping of his power and glory that drives him (temporarily) mad. In the end Cordelia and her father are reconciled, and she tries to save him but is stopped by her two evil sisters and their cold, arrogant lover (Edmund). The daughters destroy themselves and Edmund is killed by his noble brother (Edgar), but not in time to save Cordelia, who is hanged. Lear dies shortly thereafter and Edgar becomes the new king.

King Lear is an emotionally hard read, and even harder to watch. So much suffering, loss, and hatred—this life lesson is no walk in the park, no bed of roses. Although King Lear is not utterly pessimistic, there is no denying this play’s pervasive darkness, both in its portrayals of human evil (for example, Goneril and Regan) and its vision of nature’s cruel indifference (for example, Lear’s mental illness and the raging storm).12 The play is, in fact, every bit as bleak and troubling as life can be—especially life under the clutches of the desire for revenge. It is a bleak look at life before one learns the grown-up joy of forgiving love.

As Christian pastors and theologians we can benefit from our schooling with Lear (if we open both our hearts and minds to this play), because we find glimpses here of hard-won, Christian optimism, and because we learn much here about the triumph of mature love. It would be easy to miss the resurrection of hope in this play and—especially in the later scenes—to overlook the glimpses of new life. No critic denies that Shakespeare was influenced by his humanistic, Christian culture, but most would agree that King Lear is not an explicitly Christian play.13 One looks in vain for theistic language, and this, combined with the play’s clearly pagan context, would seem to preclude classical Christian categories. But for those of us who make the outrageous claim that our very lives are rooted in a grisly death two thousand years ago, it is not difficult to insist that The Tragedy of King Lear contains powerful Christian themes—in fact, that it captures the mystery of the death to self and resurrection of hope that lie at the heart of both the human experience and of our faith. We see it as Christian not for its explicit language but for its consistent emphasis on the paradoxical nature of our lives—lives that move between the poles of strength and weakness, finding and losing, foolishness and wisdom. We find it Christian, too, in its portrayal of wisdom as a phenomenon beyond lust, power, arrogance, and violence.14

This play is also Christian in its echoes of an upside-down value system, in its

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12 Contra G. B. Harrison, Shakespeare’s Tragedies (London: Routledge and Paul, 1951), or Jonathan Dollimore, Radical Tragedy (Brighton, UK: Harvester, 1984), who, in our opinion, take overly pessimistic views.
13 Representative examples include Bloom, Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human; and Northrop Frye, Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967).
revelation that, in the face of all our greed and childish desires to grasp power and security through things (including people treated as “things”), only love matters. When Lear is reunited with Cordelia, he says, “If you have poison for me, I will drink it” (4.4.72), quite aware at last of the terrible hurt he has caused and no longer interested in pride or power. Yet Cordelia, ever quietly generous of heart, does not ruminate on her hurt—she is able to cast off the ugly “weeds that are memories of those worse hours” (4.7.8) and forgive her father. Thus we learn with Lear that kingdoms fade and go, people get old and die, our life plot can horribly disappoint us, but, in the end, if forgiving love remains, there is always hope.¹⁵

“Lear stands as an ancient yet contemporary midrash on the word of real power that transforms us and saves us from ourselves”

Our lessons from Lear provide motivation for entering a process of forgiveness in our own lives, repenting as we need and extending forgiveness as we can. The play does not name but reveals the Power that heals both those who harm and those who suffer. This Power is one we Christians know as we read back over our own stories; it leads to genuine spiritual transformation, as required for peacemaking, and can change both human insight and nature itself (“the terrors of the earth,” 2.4.281). King Lear reminds us that, through a Christian lens, such power is appropriated in our lives by actively enduring the suffering that comes to us, impatient as we may be in its grip (“No, I will be the pattern of all patience; / I will say nothing” [3.2.37]),¹⁶ and through restored relationships, such as Lear and Cordelia’s. This is the core of what matters most to us as Christians; this is an echo of the paradoxical wisdom in the story of Jesus Christ. Lear stands as an ancient yet contemporary midrash on the word of real power that transforms us and saves us from ourselves.

WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT—AND WHAT IT IS

As we watch this play and find ourselves, albeit painfully, identifying with Lear and his foolish pride, we discover again that learning forgiveness is also unlearning. Lear’s hubris is beaten down by betrayal, rejection, and even by nature herself; this must occur before he can be reconciled with Cordelia, who has truly loved him all along. This painful unlearning (“O me, my heart, my rising heart!” [2.4.119]) is not unknown to any of us, for each person must “unlearn” something in order to forgive. We all carry false, internalized narratives about what constitutes forgiveness, narratives that may have arisen, either implicitly or explicitly, from our families of origin or from our cultural exposures. For each of us, these have been unconscious yet powerful forces in our lives. They are beliefs that unduly

¹⁵As Hughes wrote, it is not Lear’s suffering alone that redeems him; it is the love of Cordelia, who never lets him go. See Hughes, “The Politics of Forgiveness.”

¹⁶Lear says this in Act 3, in spite of his consistent, play-long impatience.
complicate things as we try to forgive or accept forgiveness. Shakespeare brilliantly either ignores these myths or refutes them through the structure or language of his marvelous play.

The first myth concerns our belief that forgiveness will occur as a single, one-time event. Persons who are considering forgiveness typically visualize it as a rather clean-cut drama. They picture themselves standing before the one who has injured them and making a speech or sending a touching and well-composed letter. In the next scene of their fantasy, their written or verbal apology or extension of forgiveness is gratefully accepted and leads to a perfect reconciliation, perhaps symbolized with an embrace. Such things certainly happen from time to time and are delightful to witness. But far more typical, and more in keeping with our stubborn nature (that is, our long-standing defenses against narcissistic wounding), is the mundane story of two people entering a long, slow process. This leads, at best, to a liberating but imperfect new place for them to live, a place of increased freedom and space. Thus, most forgiveness is more like slowly laying down a burden than like a sudden flash of light, for the truth is that forgiveness takes time. After serious harm, any actual spoken words are often preceded by weeks, months, or even years of struggle. During this process, both the offended and the offender have Herculean tasks to perform—they must suffer the effects of the hurt, grieve their losses, grow more psychologically flexible and more spiritually mature, gain new insights about themselves and their relationship, decide they have been stuck in one-sided ways of thinking about things, and, most important of all, become motivated to forgive. As Edmund says when his eyes are finally opened to his brother’s goodness, “What you have charged me with, that have I done; / And more, much more: the time will bring it out / 'Tis past, and so am I” (5.3.162–163).

Sometimes, but not inevitably, reconciliation follows forgiveness. One clear result of this insight is that forgiveness and reconciliation, while closely related, are not the same. Both require a transformation of self and depend, from a faith perspective, on the abiding presence of God in our lives. In the end, injured persons stop ruminating and let go of their bitterness and hatred. It appears that, for men, this process is over when they decide not to seek revenge; for women, it is

17First author, Janet Ramsey, is a pastoral counselor and has based this conclusion on her years of working with couples and other estranged individuals.

18This is the language used, for example, in the movie starring Denzel Washington as a U.S. Army officer who cannot forgive himself after he makes a deadly mistake: Courage Under Fire (20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1996).

19It is interesting that in the New Testament, as Martin Marty notes, forgiveness and reconciliation always occur together. See further, Marty, “The Ethos of Christian Forgiveness.” Yet in our human experience they do not and cannot always occur at the same time—sometimes for the sake of our continued safety in dangerous situations such as spousal abuse.

20See the many definitions of revenge by male scholars, e.g., “In genuine forgiveness, one who has suffered an unjust injury chooses to abandon his or her right to resentment and retaliation, and instead offers mercy to the offender,” Robert D. Enright and Catherine T. Coyle, “The Process Model of Forgiveness,” in Worthington, Dimensions of Forgiveness, 140.
more likely to end with increased self-confidence and the replacement of victimhood with empowerment.  

A second myth is that forgiveness is mostly an individual matter, “just between us two.” The reality of life is that brokenness, oppression, and hatred are intractable social realities as well, systemic in nature, even when the estrangement appears to be located in individuals. The complex familial, political, and social connections between Lear, Gloucester, and their children, allies, and enemies are clear examples of how intricate, deep, and interconnected are all divisions between and among persons. To the extent that forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation occur in this play, they are indeed communal and complex (for example, the strange “repentance” of Edmund at the end of the play).

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The relationship of love to forgiveness can also be misunderstood, leading to mythical results. People sometimes believe that forgiveness is a test of love (“If you love me, you must forgive me!”). Lear’s early understanding of love was similar, with his kingdom, rather than his affections, the reward he offered; his behavior set in motion the tragic divisions that animate the entire play. Cordelia’s understanding of love—markedly superior to her father’s—stands as a corrective to this naive concept of love and/or forgiveness on demand. For although Scripture teaches that we are commanded both to love and to forgive, and although Jesus commands us to love our enemies (Matt 5:44), the First Gospel also makes clear that this is possible only for those who are already living in the reign and realm of heaven, already following the Messiah in the way of the cross. Such forgiving love draws upon a power that is beyond human powers and implies a whole way of life that is grounded in the community of faith—“so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:45). Sadly, God’s commandments are easily misappropriated by perpetrators of harm, as the sad history of human brokenness reveals.

In its most profound dimensions forgiveness is never a human accomplishment, an act we do on our own, by our own power. This is true even when it appears strictly interpersonal—when it occurs between us and the one we have hurt or been hurt by. The truth on the other side of this lie is that forgiveness, including that which occurs between humans, is rooted and grounded in the grace of God. Rather than an isolated, individual act, forgiveness, at the deepest level, calls for a whole new way of life, located within a new community that embodies the grace that makes it possible.  

This is what the church ought to be—but often is not. The


good news is that the Holy Spirit continues to enact precisely this power for peace in human history, through the limited means of creatures just like each of us.

A final myth is that those who forgive are weak or foolish. Perhaps this is the most dangerous and insidious myth of all, because it so often leads to a decision to seek revenge. This lie stands in direct opposition to the journey of Jesus to the cross, which is a story of strength, wisdom, and the love of God, not a portrayal of the weakness of God as it appears to non-Christians. It is clear for the gospel writers that Jesus is neither weak nor foolish, but is willing to lay down his life for others (Mark 10:45), for the sake of their forgiveness. As Paul explicitly confesses, “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). Likewise in Lear the worldly and material “strength” of the king and his daughters/enemies (especially Goneril, Regan, and Edmund) are undone by their own lust, arrogance, and sin as the tragedy unfolds. It is only those who appear to be weak and foolish—such as Cordelia, the Fool, and the blind and battered Lear—who are in fact both wise and in possession of a kind of spiritual strength. The truth on the other side of this myth is that forgiveness and reconciliation take profound courage, strong moral fiber, and spiritual wisdom—qualities that persons who choose crass materialism and a lust for power can neither understand nor achieve. The fact that these are gifts from God does not mean that living in the light of the cross is ever easy, or a choice one makes out of weakness or foolishness. On the contrary, it calls forth the best in each one of us. Early in the play, in his arrogance (and when he is actually weak!), Lear eschews forgiveness as demeaning to his authority and dignity: “Ask her for forgiveness? Do you mark how this becomes the house” (2.4.153). But later, during the terrible storm, his words show that Lear has learned empathy, another strength required to forgive: “O! I have ta’en too little care of this” (3.4.33). He then seeks divine help: “I’ll pray and then I’ll sleep....And show the heavens more just” (3.4.28, 36).

Come, let’s away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage,
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales and laugh
At gilded butterflies. (5.3.8–13)

Lear’s vision at the end of the play could not be more different from his perspective in Act One. Reconciled with his dear Cordelia, he is now content to be with her in prison—two birds in the cage, not one on the throne. His dreams now are filled with images of close relationality; narcissistic isolation has been overcome. Love has trumped his need for power: Cordelia’s love, freely given. He visualizes his future time with her as a time of humble joy—song, laughter, prayer, and the telling of tales. These are now what he values in life, precisely the simple de-
lights of life he overlooked as a king and, most likely, a father. Although the scene is filled with tragic irony (Cordelia and he will soon die), the proximity of death makes love all the more poignant and forgiveness all the more imperative. As one critic noted, “this is no longer folly at all, but real sight and knowledge, the highest wisdom one can achieve—a loving humility, a humble love.”

“When, through God’s help, we can leave the madness of our despair and accept the losses and hurts we have experienced, human forgiveness becomes possible”

When persons who are estranged can put aside old goals and find a vision for relationality that hints of laughter, prayer, and the telling of stories great and small, then human forgiveness becomes possible. When, through God’s help, we can leave the madness of our despair and accept the losses and hurts we have experienced, human forgiveness becomes possible. When we let God turn our suffering into empathy, such that we no longer see the beloved as a means to our own end but revel in simply being in her presence, then forgiveness as a way of life becomes possible. Another way to describe this, of course, is with the beautiful words Christ taught us: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9).

Any introduction to such an important and complex realm as forgiveness remains partial. We hope, with this essay, to have stimulated your own thinking, built toward a larger and more expansive understanding of Christian forgiveness, and helped you along just a bit as you work this vital, real-life curriculum. We hope, too, that if you are not quite ready to sing in the cage with Lear, you will have at least a fresh vision to provoke your thoughts. This is both necessary and proper, for the church is a community that, at its core, practices and teaches forgiveness.

We recognize the brokenness of our fallen world, but we also worship a blessed Trinity of forgiveness and shalom. These truths lie at the heart of Christian ministry; surely they repay whatever theological attention we can give them.

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