The Practice of Forgiveness: Disciples as Forgiven Forgivers

MARTHA E. STORTZ

“Lord, teach us to pray,” the disciples begged Jesus (Luke 11:1), and Jesus responded with the Lord’s Prayer. The prayer offers a basic course in Christian discipleship. After praising God and the coming kingdom, the prayer asks for what Christians most need in the journey of discipleship. Humans need food, clothing, and shelter in order to survive; Christians need food, protection, and forgiveness in order to be disciples. Forgiveness ranks alongside the need for food and protection as something essential to Christian discipleship. Why?

Forgiveness enables the disciples to travel together. Without it, each would travel alone, alienated from others by everything from petty grievance to unimaginable cruelty. A petition charts a single course toward human community: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12; cf. Luke 11:4).

Repeating these words in daily prayer makes them no easier to live. When every instinct strains for revenge, forgiveness feels unnatural. The good news is that an impossible demand is also a divine gift. Jesus urged disciples to pray daily for the ability to forgive, reminding them that they too stood in need of forgiveness. As the disciples experienced Jesus’ steady pardon of their fecklessness, their faithlessness, and their need for sleep, Jesus hoped they would find it easier to forgive those who had wronged them. Then and now, Jesus desires disciples to become practiced in

Repenting, remembering, and reconciling are the three life-giving steps in forgiveness. They turn us away from their deadly opposites: revenge, amnesia, and recrimination.
the art of forgiveness. As we forgive and experience forgiveness, we become forgiven forgivers.\(^1\)

Jesus illustrated the prayer’s petition in a parable. Prompted by Peter’s question, “How often should I forgive?” Jesus responded with a story of a slave who was forgiven—but unforgiving (Matt 18:21–34). The slave’s master forgave him a huge debt, and the slave responded by demanding payment of debt owed him by one of his friends. The master was furious: “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” (v. 33). The slave was forgiven—but not forgiving.

Being a forgiven forgiver moves beyond isolated acts of pardon to create a settled disposition of character. For example, after hours of counseling, alone and together, a friend finally forgave her husband’s infidelity. They stayed together, salvaged the marriage, yet she made him pay for the infidelity in great ways and small. She withheld affection; she grew bitter and resentful; she etched their marriage with the acid of jealousy. When one of their children ran into trouble at school, she went ballistic, erupting with a ferocity disproportionate to the perceived offense. Apparently true forgiveness had not yet happened here.

The forgiveness that discipleship demands stretches beyond the pardon of isolated offense to open the possibility of a more charitable stance toward the world. Psychologist Fred Luskin captures the transformation: “In a nutshell, besides helping to heal past hurts, forgiveness can help minimize the possibility of creating present and future hurts. Another way of putting this is we can use forgiveness to inoculate ourselves against being hurt again.”\(^2\) Jesus put things more succinctly: “Forgive us...as we forgive....” Christians become more forgiving people by living into the Lord’s Prayer: we practice forgiveness.

This does not happen overnight; it is a miracle of grace that forgiveness happens at all. Christian forgiveness transforms us through repentance, remembrance, and reconciliation. Repentance enables disciples to turn away from violence. As we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses...,” we remind ourselves that we are all sinners in need of repentance. We yearn to return evil for evil. Repenting of our own capacity for violence, we are all invited to refuse retaliation and embrace forgiveness. Repenting is the first step in forgiveness—and revenge is its chief temptation.

A second step in forgiveness overturns the popular counsel to “forgive and forget.” Memory freshens an injury, but it also underscores the daily need to turn


consciously away from avenging it. In addition, remembering our own tendency toward revenge and our own desperate need for repentance opens us to being re-membered in the body of Christ. Remembering is a second step in forgiveness—and amnesia is its chief temptation.

Reconciliation is the final step in forgiveness, enabling disciples to embrace that most difficult command of Jesus: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44). Recrimination blocks reconciliation, for it refuses solidarity and chooses alienation. Reconciling is the third step in forgiveness—and recrimination is its chief temptation.

REPENTING: AN INVITATION TO BOTH VICTIM AND OFFENDER

Repentance invites everyone to confess the dark side of the Golden Rule: “I could do unto you what you have done unto me—and then some!” Repentance resists the irresistible desire to return evil for evil. The Greek word for repentance, metanoia, literally means “turning away.” It signals a turn away from violence on the part of both the victim and offender. “Forgive us...as we forgive....” Those who pray this prayer remind themselves again and again of their own propensity for violence. The petition presents repentance as the first step in this practice of forgiveness.

Too often people treat forgiveness and repentance as if they were separate job descriptions: one for the victim, the other for the offender. The offender’s task is to repent; the victim’s to forgive. Christian forgiveness invites everyone to repent, including the victim, as all acknowledge the desire for revenge and renounce it.

In Exclusion and Embrace theologian Miroslav Volf relates the story of a Muslim woman from the former Yugoslavia.

I am a Muslim, and I am thirty-five years old. To my second son who was just born, I gave the name “Jihad.” So he would not forget the testament of his mother—revenge. The first time I put my baby at my breast I told him, “May this milk choke you if you forget.” So be it. The Serbs taught me to hate. For the last two months there was nothing in me. No pain, no bitterness. Only hatred. I taught these children to love. I did. I am a teacher of literature. I was born in Ilijaš and I almost died there. My student, Zoran, the only son of my neighbor, urinated into my mouth. As the bearded hooligans standing around laughed, he told me: “You are good for nothing else, you stinking Muslim woman...” I do not know whether I first heard the cry or felt the blow. My former colleague, a teacher of physics, was yelling like mad...[a]nd kept hitting me. Wherever he could. I have become insensitive to pain. But my soul? It hurts. I taught them to love and all the while they were making preparations to destroy everything that is not of the Orthodox faith. Jihad—war. This is the only way....

The revenge unleashed by humiliation poisons future generations. A young boy learns to hate. He teaches his children to hate, his children teach their children

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to hate, and the inheritance of generations is violence. Words from the Hebrew Scriptures seem less a curse than a simple description of life in a world that practices revenge, not forgiveness. Children are punished “for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation...” (Exod 20:5).

Moreover, the violence escalates. Someone steals a lamb from an enemy’s fold; the enemy responds by eliminating the thief’s entire flock. The thief retaliates by murdering the enemy’s children; an entire village is war. Each act of retaliation exceeds the originating offense. After a while, it may become difficult to remember what initiated the cycle of carnage. Violence has become an end in itself.

What stops revenge in its tracks? Repentance—and repentance on the part of the victim. When every cell in the body screams for retaliation, repentance confesses the desire for revenge—and then turns away from it. Repentance on the part of a victim displays a miracle of grace. In telling her story, the Muslim teacher may be making a small gesture of repentance. She has to listen to herself describe the difference between who she was and who she has become. Someone who taught love and literature now instructs her own children in revenge. The interview itself could signal the start of a miracle.

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Repentance stands as the first movement in forgiveness. Repenting of the desire to retaliate, forgiveness refuses to respond in kind. Forgiveness resists throwing any fuel on the fire, and without more to burn, the fire extinguishes itself. Philosopher Hannah Arendt addresses the need for forgiveness in a world bent on revenge. A deed stimulates reactions that escalate in both intensity and violence, and “we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell.” Forgiveness alone breaks the cycle of violence.

REMEMBERING: DANGEROUS MEMORY

As a practice for personal and political communion, forgiveness renounces the pious aphorism: “Forgive and forget.” The practice of forgiveness is not about forgetting but about remembering. Forgiveness creates a dangerous memory because it permits truthful recollection of the past without the danger of reinjury or the revival of fresh rage. In the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission chose not to issue broad amnesty. Rather the Commission would only consider amnesty for those who applied for it with respect to a particular crime and who would agree to speak the truth publicly about what they had experienced. In its public hearings the Commission created a space where

citizens could remember. Both victims and offenders needed to confess what had happened. Only when people truthfully faced the past could they move into a future filled with hope.

The first disciples wrestled with painful memories of their own faithlessness and Jesus’ incomparable mercy. They remembered Judas’s betrayal of Jesus in Gethsemane with a kiss. Jesus held Judas accountable for the fatal sin in friendship with words that haunted him for the rest of his brief life: “Friend, do what you are here to do” (Matt 26:50). Nor was Judas the only disciple guilty of betrayal. The disciples remembered that Peter denied Jesus three times. They remembered their own desertion, the painful fact that Jesus died crucified between two strangers, not between two of his followers. His friends had scattered in fear. After the resurrection, the disciples went into hiding. They were probably just as afraid of running into Jesus as into the Roman authorities or the temple hierarchy. When the disciples locked themselves into an upper room, Jesus suddenly appeared among them. His forgiveness was so unexpected he had to repeat himself three times: “Peace be with you” (John 20:19, 21, 26). The words offered the disciples what they most needed but could not ask for: forgiveness.

As the disciples moved out into the world, the memory of their own betrayals shaped ministries of compassion. They forgave others—and remembered their own need for forgiveness.

Only after remembering did the disciples receive the ministry of reconciliation. Only after Jesus remembered them and forgave their disloyalty did he charge them to forgive others as they had been forgiven. To his forgiven friends Jesus entrusts the practice of forgiveness: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23). As the disciples moved out into the world, the memory of their own betrayals shaped ministries of compassion. They forgave others—and remembered their own need for forgiveness. They remembered their own need for forgiveness—and forgave others. Every encounter with a sinner seeking forgiveness reminded them of Jesus’ own lavish mercy toward them, and every confession recalled their own gracious transformation from betrayers into confessors. The disciples bore for the rest of their lives marks of their own need for forgiveness. In forgiving they remembered. In remembering they forgave. As forgiving fused with remembering, the disciples became forgiven forgivers.

Remembering, however, can be excruciating for a victim who is less than divine, and much of the therapeutic literature on forgiveness counsels amnesia: “Forgive and forget!” Popular books promote forgiveness as a way of moving on.5

5Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Discipleship (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 40. See especially his chapters on “Retribution” and “The Enemy,” 131–145.

Experts recognize that all too often remembering replays the original injury. Remembering reinjures victims, magnifying the impact of the original assault. An example illustrates this. A woman—let’s call her Ann—suffered date rape when she was in college decades ago. She recounted the original violation, and as she spoke, her face colored, her voice trembled, her pulse quickened. Even though the event was long past, it was as if everything had happened yesterday. Ann relived the injury as she recounted it. What role does memory serve in this situation? It seems to replay a painful scenario, reviving all the negative emotions evoked in the first place. Yet, trying to forget a traumatic experience never works. A chance encounter, a turn of phrase, even a smell brings the event back afresh, its power undiminished by time. Every slight and every insult replays this tape, violating this woman all over again. Is there a way of remembering that does not reinjure?

Despite the injustice of the crime done to her, Ann realized she had a choice. She could choose to remain a victim, harboring the hurt and identifying herself as “victim.” Or she could choose to move away from victimhood. Gradually Ann saw that the injury would turn into the master narrative for everything else that followed. She did not want an enemy controlling her life: “I realized this whole thing was renting too much space in my head. I needed to renegotiate the rental agreement. I just got tired of being a victim.” Even her language altered, as she moved from accusative to nominative case: “He hurt me” became “I want things to change.” Turning away from victimhood, she departed from a vicious cycle of reinjury.

Changing from victim to survivor was not easy. Yet now Ann has another memory to hold alongside the memory of her original violation: the memory of her successful struggle to be a survivor rather than simply a victim. These memories sustain Ann and make her strong at the point of greatest injury.

Memory works therapeutically in the personal realm; it works restoratively in the public realm. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission fought mightily against public amnesia, seeking to remember various truths of what had happened. From the hearing rooms, testimony of both victims and supporters of the apartheid regime emerged. From the fields, pathologists chronicled forensic evidence of horrific atrocity. There was no “letting bygones be bygones” as some parties may have wished, and Bishop Desmond Tutu remarked: “Unless we look the beast in the eye we find it has an uncanny habit of returning to hold us hostage.” Memory is the only way to prevent atrocity from happening again. Going forward into a new future means going back to recover the memory of past injustices.

Jesus suffered atrocities of his own, the gravest of which was betrayal by his own followers. Instead of moving forward without this feckless crew, Jesus moved back. He returned to the disciples that had abandoned him. He returned to repair damage that was uniquely their own, and he returned in peace. In reconnecting

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with his friends, he neither ignored their offense nor pretended it away. He simply offered them peace. As forgiven forgivers, these disciples moved with Jesus into God’s future. This is how memory serves the practice of forgiveness.

A medieval legend about the disciple Judas illustrates the reach of divine reconciliation. The canonical biblical texts present Judas as a tragic example of the power of guilt. His deed brought him censure from his friends, ridicule from the temple hierarchy, and overwhelming isolation. Alone and miserable, Judas watched events that he had set in motion now spin out of his control. He could no longer live with himself. Crushed by the weight of his crime, Judas hung himself in a potter’s field. The biblical story ends in suicide, but this legend keeps the cameras rolling. According to this legend, Jesus descended into hell after his crucifixion. There he remembered Judas. Jesus sought him out among the lost souls in hell in order to unburden him. Jesus found Judas in order to remember—and to forgive. Forgiveness becomes a ministry of re-membering—literally, a reintegration of all things into a new whole. The author of the pastoral epistle to the Colossians suggests nothing less: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things...” (Col 1:19–20). Through dangerous memory the Spirit moves toward reconciliation.

**RECONCILING: THE LIMITS OF FORGIVENESS**

Are there some crimes that cannot be forgiven? Are there enemies that fall outside the embrace of divine mercy? The hardest sayings in the Gospels challenge Christians to extend forgiveness to the enemy. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” (Matt 5:44). As these words were written, Christians suffered the first waves of persecution that hit their early communities. This command fell hard on disciples facing martyrdom. Commanding love in a time of persecution turned the canons of justice upside down.

Love is a gesture of defiance in a world that threatens to implode in hatred. Forgiveness arrests a cycle of violence and points all parties toward reconciliation. Note that the “enemy” may still be regarded as “enemy.” Jesus did not recommend pretending that the enemy be magically morphed into “friend” or “family.” Ann put the distinction well: “I have forgiven him. That doesn’t mean I have to trust him with my life. Believe me, I don’t. I am working to love him as an enemy.” While respecting the distance that violation creates, Jesus nonetheless pushed for the quality of relationship to alter: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

This gesture of defiance fits with everything that the Gospels record Jesus as having done. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus related without discrimination to people in need. It mattered little to him whether some among his followers regarded others as “enemy.” He healed the servant of a Roman centurion, and the Romans were “enemy” to the Jews. He resuscitated the daughter of the leader of a synagogue, and the religious leaders were “enemy” to many of Jesus’ disciples. He spoke with women, not just his own countrywomen, but Samaritan and Syrophoe-
nician women, people who were “enemy” to the Jews. He dined with tax collectors and sinners one night, then Pharisees another. He chided a rich young man, and then repaired to the home of wealthy friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, to scrape off the road dust. Rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, women and men, foreigner and native-born, righteous and sinner: each one of these groups was at odds with the other. Yet Jesus displayed love to all. Perhaps the message he intended to get across to his followers was simply this: “If you travel with me, you cannot afford to have enemies: it will be too confusing to keep track of who they are.”

Is love always possible? Are we being asked to do something beyond our capabilities? The answer to these questions lies in the crucifixion. Too often Jesus’ words from the cross play with “Hallelujah” choruses in the background: we fast-forward to Easter. In fact, the forces of evil gathered at the foot of the cross. Jesus felt himself abandoned by friends, followers, even his beloved Father. He stared into the abyss of evil. His choice was clear: join it or defy it. From the cross Jesus defied evil with a gesture of forgiveness: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

We like to think that Jesus spoke with compassion, but he may well have spit these words out. He was human enough to feel all the recrimination to which he was entitled, and he too wrestled with the unnatural character of forgiveness. Whether his tone was one of mercy or recrimination, the words themselves shock us. The man who challenged his disciples to love their enemies could not muster forgiveness on his own. Jesus did not say: “I forgive you...” and he did not because he could not. He could not forgive all of this evil on his own—and he did not have to. From the cross Jesus summoned a love greater than his own: “Father, forgive them...” With these words, he asked God to forgive what he could not. He found the grace to forgive, not from within, but from the One who sent him.

The forgiveness of Jesus from the cross stands as a stunning example to all disciples. When our frail powers of repenting, remembering, and reconciling are exhausted, we can ask God to forgive our enemies, until we can forgive them on our own. C. S. Lewis recalls the cruelty of a schoolmaster who had for years abused his students. The man had long since died, but the memory of his abuse scarred Lewis deeply. He turned the matter over to prayer—with surprising results. He wrote to his friend Malcolm: “Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered—or felt as if I did—that I had really forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying, and praying that I might.”* Lewis called on the

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forgiveness of God to help him when his own powers fell short. Over time he found forgiveness; over time forgiveness found him. Reconciliation was possible.

“Forgive us...as we forgive...”: we pray daily for the grace to be forgiven and to forgive. Over time and in community God works on us, transforming us into forgiven forgivers. The practice of forgiveness is indispensable for the journey of discipleship, inviting us to live into a promised peace.

MARTHA E. STORTZ is professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, California.