Forgiven and Forgiving in the Dynamics of Parish Life

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The words were out of her mouth so quickly that she was shocked! Not only were the words aggressive but they were also shouted... to the president of the congregation... at a church council meeting... with many visiting “loyal supporters of the pastor” crowded into the room... and she was the vice president of the congregation. The congregation was sharply split over whether the senior pastor should stay or resign.

She was at the end of her emotional rope with the pastor and president’s behind-the-scenes behavior. The anger bursting from her lips and soul was filled with so much uncontrolled energy that it overwhelmed her and left casualties of friendships, lost trust, and damaged faith. Could reconciliation, to forgive and be forgiven, ever happen in this congregation again?

Shortly after that apocalyptic church council meeting, the senior pastor resigned after having served that congregation for less than three years. He had a large severance package in his pocket. One segment of the congregation was extremely angry and petitioning for the recall of the church council and the new council president. Another segment of the congregation was relieved and ecstatic that the senior pastor had finally resigned. And yet another segment was puzzled by the whole event and largely unaware of the depth of the conflict until the pastor resigned.

Forgiveness is a journey, especially in conflicted congregations. It does not happen overnight. Considering some basic factors in this healing journey can help congregations experience new life.
It was about one month after the senior pastor resigned that I, the interim pastor, arrived. To speak of forgiveness at that point was profoundly premature. The path toward forgiving and being forgiven in the dynamics of parish life is intentional, steady, firm (meaning having boundaries and expectations), loving, and it takes time. Such forgiveness is a journey. Such forgiveness is also often corporate or communal, as witnessed by many of the stories in the Bible.

I met with the group petitioning for the recall of the church council and resignation of the vice president—now president—on my first day at the congregation. The following letter to the congregation was written the next day:

Dear Friends in Christ,

I begin my time with you humbly. Your congregation has been through a traumatic time. Your Senior Pastor has left after a relatively short period of service. Turmoil, conflict, divisions within the congregation, many questions and pain, have surrounded this event. I do not presume to say, “I understand how you feel.” I do understand that there are as many strong feelings and opinions as there are people at this church. That is normal!

Such times are powerful, in that they consume our time, energy, and focus, deflecting us from God’s mission. And sadly, such times are not new in the history of God’s people on earth. It is significant that I start my time with you during Advent. Advent is a time of anxious waiting, of wondering what new thing God is trying to have born. Around 2,000 years ago, as Mary and Joseph were waiting for the birth of their son, the Jews had been anxiously waiting for a new, liberating word from God for over 300 years. The Jewish people were hungry for light in their darkness.

As happens with the passage of time, the people had settled into predictable routines of life and worship. In their routines, they thought they knew how God worked. They were in for a surprise! During the advent of things just around the corner, God always hears our cries and sees our needs. God gives us exactly what we need, except it often surprises us! The angel came to Mary and Joseph telling them God was giving them something very new. What a surprise! God gave them, and us, not only a new and liberating word, but also a word that breathed and walked. What a surprise! Nothing has been the same since! What a surprise!

Here is what I trust. I trust God to bring light into our darkness! I trust God to bring healing to our wounds! I trust God to bring unity to our divisions! I trust God to bring wholeness to our brokenness! And in the midst of it all, I trust God to surprise us again and again!

I look forward to the time that we will have together. I invite conversation with any that wish to ask questions or share their hearts. I will work to keep healthy communication flowing. For example, I spent an evening with representatives of a group of your members who signed a petition to have the church council and president recalled. It was decided by all present not to pursue the petition at this time, rather, to table it until the Annual Congregational Meeting. All agreed that the church has been through enough turmoil at this time, they wanted to
work together for whatever was best for the church. They also saw that the church needed a time to breathe deeply.

Here is what I trust. I trust that when we humans stop long enough to breathe deeply, God may surprise us with something we could hardly dream of, like peace, comfort, love, joy, or forgiveness.

Awaiting God’s surprises with you,
Your Interim Senior Pastor

The message of the letter was conveyed in every possible way during the interim: at meetings, in private conversations and personal relationships, with staff, in church council, in Bible studies, and in sermons. Every major trauma initiates the need for an interim time: a time to step back, a time to remember some of the basics of walking through life and conflict together, a time to forgive and be forgiven, and a time to heal what has been broken.

The following list of basic factors in the healing journey has been gleaned from the experience of serving twelve interim pastorates and of thirty-three years of ordained ministry, which include nearly ten years of working in chemical dependency treatment. One of the great joys of ministry is being part of a congregation, organization, or relationship that is being healed by God. The eleven items listed are among factors present in the healing process of forgiving and being forgiven. The list is not exhaustive, but represents the core of a reconciling ministry.

1. Do no harm!
2. Say what we trust and believe.
3. Let God, the Trinity, model unity and diversity.
4. Say and do what is normal.
5. Breathe deeply! Time is a gift.
6. Listen! Listen! Listen!
7. Unresolved pain causes more pain.
8. The answer is already yes.
9. Remember, we need a Savior!
10. Listen for laughter.
11. Pray!

1. *Do no harm* is at the core of the Hippocratic oath sworn by physicians when they receive their medical degrees. As clergy and leaders we are called to the same standard. At the beginning of a conflicted interim or when trauma erupts within one’s congregation or in the lives of those we serve, the pastor or leader is wise to state clearly and publicly, “I am here to help, not to hurt.”

In twelve-step recovery programs the fourth and fifth steps are to write a rigorous moral inventory and to confess one’s wrongdoings before God and another person. In the sixth and seventh steps, the person is to make a list of all who have been hurt or damaged by the recovering one’s past behavior. Then the person is to
make personal amends whenever possible, except when it would do more harm. The goal is to admit one’s own sins, but to do no more harm in the process.

Such a confession, stating one’s own behavior, is made not in order for the other to forgive, but because of the importance of being truthful about one’s own behavior. One confesses because one needs to: it is honest, humble, cleansing, and liberating. In this context of doing no harm, confession is good for its own sake, not the sake of eliciting forgiveness from the other. When forgiveness happens it is a surprising, blessed gift from God.

“we stand on firm ground when we say what we trust and believe from the basics of Christian faith and teaching”

2. Say what we trust and believe. The letter to the above congregation begins that process. What is at work in conflicted situations is a not-so-subtle principle: conflict tends to kidnap central beliefs and lift up lesser concerns as core to a relationship, a system, or a congregation’s life. The list of purported core issues is long, detailed, and endless: which hymnal or worship resource to use; pipe organ versus drum sets; mission work with the poor in our city or fixing the parking lot; flags in the church; sexuality; and on and on. The road back toward unity is paved with large, basic, core statements of faith: God loves, God forgives, and we are called to do the same.

We do not have to invent a psychological rationale for having people work at living together in Christ’s name. We are called to proclaim God’s promises, the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, Jesus’ parables, the cross and resurrection. We stand on firm ground when we say what we trust and believe from the basics of Christian faith and teaching.

3. Let God, the Trinity, model unity and diversity. God has been modeling, acting out for us since the beginning, what it means to be both diverse and unified. Our language and belief about the church being the body of Christ is a further example of both unity and diversity. We trust that it is a function of creation, a function of the universe, that a body, a family, a church, or an ecosystem is both a unity and a diversity.

Therefore, it follows that we are expected to figure out how to do unity and diversity in our churches, our relationships, and this can go so far as to affect our national and international policies. Unity and diversity are part of the fabric of God’s universe. Unity and diversity are how all of nature works together. It is how we are meant to work together too. This is not an option!

4. Say and do what is normal. There are two main types of “normal” to consider. The first is the everyday normal activities of a congregation. During a time of conflict or major transition such normal behaviors are important: worship, education, Bible studies, youth activities, schedules, and meetings. Whatever is normal, regular, and familiar for that congregation, do as much of this as possible.
In the Gospel of John, after the resurrection, the disciples did what was normal for them. They went back to their jobs. They went fishing. Then, in the midst of their doing the usual, Jesus came to them, gave them food to eat, and commissioned them for the next phase of their lives. When we are doing normal things, Jesus will come to us at the right time and surprise us. He will stand on the shore of our life and send us on the next steps of our journey toward God.

The second type of “normal” to consider is referenced in John 14:12. This verse holds one of the most awesome and challenging promises of Jesus in the Bible. He said, “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.”

Jesus suggests that what he did was not so incredible, so miraculous, or so great. It seems that Jesus thought that what he did was totally normal. Healing, walking on water, calming a storm, feeding the five thousand, raising people from the dead, changing water into wine are all normal events for God.

5. Breathe deeply! Time is a gift. We are called to proclaim and participate in kairos time, time intentionally filled by the activity of God, versus chronos time, the simple passage of hours, decades, and centuries. Kairos time is time planned for people to see and experience the wisdom of taking a deep breath, letting tempers cool, and of waiting for some chronos time to pass before more damage is done or more hurtful things said. At several of my interims a “grace period,” a kairos time, was instituted: a time of doing no harm, letting time pass, breathing deeply, doing normal things, and remembering together what we believe. All of the factors mentioned in this article are intentional ingredients in kairos time.

6. Listen! Listen! Listen! It is so important for the pastor or leader to listen in the midst of conflict that it seems like a cliché to say so. In the first weeks and sometimes months of an interim with a conflicted congregation, job number one is to listen. The above letter stated, “I invite conversation with any that wish to ask questions or share their hearts. I will work to keep healthy communication flowing.”

At one congregation, e-mails had become the new form of gossip and slander. I was shown a ream of e-mails that had scorched the congregation’s soul. The e-mail had become the new source of defamation and rumor mongering. Forty, sixty, or more e-mails were sent with the click of a mouse. Then an old instinct
kicked in: what is in print must be true. Via e-mail words spoken and whispered became print and, therefore, ostensibly true.

I told the congregation that e-mails were no longer allowed. Only face-to-face conversation would be permitted. E-mails could only be used to give information about meeting times. Interestingly, the e-mailing stopped and people showed up in the pastor’s office to talk in person. People began to talk face to face again.

Throughout the above interim I met regularly with the president of the congregation. The time was spent listening: to the story of the congregation; to her story; to the telling of the fateful, apocalyptic church council meeting. At the annual congregational meeting her public confession became an important step in the healing of the congregation:

As I look back on the last few council meetings, I wish I had been able to control my anger. Unfortunately, I was not and for those I have offended by my anger, I am sincerely and truly sorry. My commitment to each of you is to work with you for the good of our church, regardless of differences.1

Her confession defused the recall petitioners, who withdrew their petition to recall the church council and the president.

7. Unresolved pain causes more pain. In the midst of listening to the president of the congregation share the congregational as well as her personal story, the issues became clearer. Through listening and talking she learned that when there is more energy in the room than an issue requires, then powerful personal history has been brought into the room by one or more people. Many in the congregation had brought personal issues into a frustrating conflict with the senior pastor who had personal issues of his own. Personal history coupled with current frustrations and issues combined into a perfect storm of conflict.

The apology of the new congregational president did not include the details of her discovery. Yet, the congregation could see and feel the difference in her speech, affect, and carriage. Many approached her after the meeting and thanked her for her courage. Her public apology gave others permission to do the same. Over the ensuing months one could see former antagonists talking, laughing, and working together for the future of the congregation.

8. The answer is already yes. The Bible tells us that Jesus is God’s “Yes!”: “For the Son of God, Jesus Christ...is always ‘Yes.’ For in him every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes’” (2 Cor 1:19–20). You want peace, justice, mercy? The answer, God says, is already yes. We will work together to figure out how to make it happen. You want forgiveness? The answer is already yes. We will do everything within our power, and the power of God, to make it happen.

A story on Minnesota Public Radio helps us understand how to deal with being forgiven and forgiveness in conflicted congregations. Juan Williams of MPR was talking about the history of the Boston Red Sox. The Red Sox were the last ma-

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1The congregation president has given permission for her story to be told.
jor league baseball team to integrate racially. They had the chance in the 1940s to have both Willie Mays and Jackie Robinson on their team, but they did not want to waste their energy on “Negroes” [sic]. They did not allow black, Hispanic, or any players of color until 1959, twelve years after the rest of major league baseball began to integrate.

The current owners of the Boston Red Sox were the first to work intentionally with the black and Hispanic communities in Boston to change that long history of intolerance. They adopted a policy of “the answer is already yes” to any requests from any minority community in Boston. Do you need tickets to the game for your youth group? The game is sold-out, but the answer is already yes. We’re not sure how to do it yet, but we will figure it out. Your churches need equipment for their church baseball leagues? The answer is already yes; we’ll figure out how to make it happen.

The story crystallizes the history and hopeful future of many conflicted congregations, organizations, and families. They, too, tend to have a “history of intolerance.” The dictionary defines intolerance as (1) unable or unwilling to endure criticism or different opinions; (2) unwilling to grant equal freedom of expression, especially in religious matters; and (3) unwilling to grant or share social, political, or professional rights.

In a conflicted congregation, intolerance works insidiously. As the congregation journeyed from its beginning, it chose sides around issues such as which pastor was right; should we promote a pastor from within or call one from the outside; should we move to another site or stay here; or traditional versus contemporary worship.

Predictably, when issues arose, intolerance would rule the day. The evidence of intolerance often included sides being chosen, friends becoming enemies, clergy and members leaving. The congregation usually worked to pull itself back together each time and move on, but intolerance continued to live, lying dormant in dark places, awaiting its next chance to strike. Intolerance is the enemy of God’s people.

The antidote to intolerance is what the new owners of the Boston Red Sox are practicing. Whatever the issue or problem they say, “The answer is already yes!” They start by saying yes and then work together to figure out how to make it happen.

9. Remember, we need a Savior. We are not naïve about sin. As we live together we discover that even when we are at our best, things still may not work. We still hurt one another, and we still start wars, both literally and figuratively.

In the midst of the shock of sin in our midst, we can begin to ask the central question: Why do we need a Savior? Oh, yes, I remember! If we could have made this planet one of peace, forgiveness, and unity on our own, we would have already done so. We are smart and amazingly resourceful. If we could have figured out hu-

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man behavior and invented consistently accurate means of communication, forgiveness, and reconciliation, we would have already done so. If we could have created lasting unity and diversity by our own best efforts, inventions, and discoveries, we would have already done so. But we never have, nor will we ever.

“God’s people keep proving over and over their need for a Savior!”

God’s people keep proving over and over their need for a Savior! The story of God and God’s imperfect people throughout the Bible and our history up to this moment is comforting to congregations who encounter the power of sin. They think they are the only ones in history to have gone through such trauma and pain, because it is their own. They are shocked that things have gone so badly. Their faith has often been shaken to its core. They are comforted to be reminded that God sent us Jesus at just such a time, “while we were still sinners” (Rom 5:8). They are awed that, like God’s people throughout history, God gives them a Savior.

10. Listen for laughter! When deep trauma has happened in a congregation; when ugly things have been shouted, whispered behind closed doors, or e-mailed; when intolerance and sin stalk the building, laughter is seldom heard. After church or meetings people tend to leave quickly. Friendly conversation, punctuated by smiles and laughter, has almost disappeared. As healing takes place, as people, over time, forgive and are forgiven, laughter is reborn. Laughter is a sign of healing. Listen for it. Point it out when you hear it. Laughter is a gift of God that accompanies forgiveness. Celebrate it!

11. Pray! First, always, and finally, we pray. The Serenity Prayer, attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, is helpful to remember not only because of the words, but also because of the truth of its pattern. The original prayer, written in 1943, is more radically intentional than the somewhat sanitized version popularly prayed now. Niebuhr’s original prayer was, “God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

In conclusion, I have watched and participated in families, congregations, and organizations that have changed as God has worked in the midst of them. The eleven factors highlighted are by no means exhaustive, but in God’s hands they are powerful, accumulative, and effective. Congregations, organizations, families, and individuals can be transformed as they experience God’s liberating gift of healing, of forgiving, and of being forgiven.

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