



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

September 11, 2011: Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Karen Fitzpatrick

RCL: Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114 or Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35
LM: Sirach 27:30—28:7; Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12; Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness. Even people of faith struggle to forgive when another's sin is terribly violent and obviously wrong, such as when it involves spousal or child abuse or murder of a loved one. "How could I forgive *that*?" the believer asks. "I could never say that was okay!"

This is when we need to clarify what forgiveness means.

Marie was moving along in the process preparing her for baptism at the Easter Vigil, when she and her two children would enter the waters of immersion into Christ. It was winter when the topic of forgiveness surfaced, and Marie sought me out for some private conversation. Her 9-year-old cousin had been murdered when visiting a friend overnight. The man who killed the two boys and the mother was apprehended. Adding salt to the wound, during the trial the perpetrator made a pass at Marie in the court hallway. He is now in prison. "I hate him with all my being," Marie said. "How could I ever forgive him for taking Jason's innocent life?"

Moving from such justified anger to the hope of forgiving is a long journey. It's a journey she needed to be on if she were to be baptized at Easter, for she could not be filled with hate and filled with Christ simultaneously.

My former parish colleague Martha Alken, O.P., has written a book called *The Healing Power of Forgiving*.¹ Her writing has helped me articulate to parishioners that their forgiving someone guilty of a heinous offense does not mean they're saying the act is okay. It means they will no longer let hate and unforgiveness be paramount in their lives. It means they are willing to recognize that the perpetrator is also a human being who is more than this one act. Once they allow the villain some humanity, then they can begin the process of forgiving.

Marie was not ready to forgive her cousin's killer by Easter, but she had resolved that she wanted to be able to forgive. She had begun the journey. We too can pray for the grace of a forgiving heart.

We can decide to walk in the spiral of forgiveness or in the spiral of violence. If we stand in the spiral of forgiveness, we choose nonviolent action in our relationships and in our approach to social issues. We will not bear a punishing attitude toward those receiving welfare assistance. We will support nonmilitary solutions to international conflicts, conscious of how entering the spiral of violence affects hungry peoples' lives and diverts resources from other social needs. We will support debt relief for the world's poorest countries so that



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they can rebuild their societies based on justice and wholeness. And we will forgive our political leaders when their voices and votes fall short of our hopes.

At times self-forgiveness is the most difficult gift to accept. John Shea, an author and storyteller, offers an intriguing interpretation of today's Gospel reading.ⁱⁱ Pointing out the parallel phrasing in the two situations between the debtor and the king and then the debtor and the fellow servant, Shea suggests that the latter two may be the same person. The king forgives the servant, but the servant cannot forgive himself. This turns the second dialogue into a monologue. Being unable to accept forgiveness, he (and we) remain unforgiven.

You may disagree with Shea's view on this passage, but his perspective sheds fresh light on this story. When we cannot forgive ourselves, we tend to carry an attitude of unforgiveness into our relationships with others. We also get frustrated at our own responses to hunger and other problems, feeling we're never doing enough. Being gentle with ourselves and understanding that we can only do so much in the moments we have will let us persevere for the long haul. Since we don't work alone on hunger and justice advocacy issues but join many others in our witness to Congress, we can enjoy comfort and grace-filled rest rather than remain our own harshest critics.

Children's Time

Children often learn forgiveness at home in their early years as parents encourage them to forgive things their friends or siblings have done. Some of the best teaching of forgiveness for young ones, however, is when a significant adult models this by asking the child's forgiveness for a shortcoming such as impatience or inattention. Perhaps you could ask the children what it is like to be forgiven. When we give and receive forgiveness, we are building the reign of God—making the world more like what God intends.

Musical Suggestions

Prepared by Larry Hollar

Where Charity and Love Prevail—NCH 396

Deep Down in My Soul—GC 880

Pues Si Vivimos (When We Are Living)—UMH 356

There's a Wideness in God's Mercy—PH 298

Reflection from Hunger for the Word, Year A

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ⁱ Martha Alken, O.P., *The Healing Power of Forgiving* (New York: Crossroad/Herder & Herder, 1997)

ⁱⁱ John Shea, *The Our Father*, two audiotape cassettes, part 2, side B (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 1992).