

## Genesis 45:3-15    Luke 6:27-38

### Forgiveness heals both

Buechner says of forgiveness: To forgive somebody is to say one way or another, "You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you've done and though we may both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you for my friend.



To accept forgiveness means to admit that you've done something unspeakable that needs to be forgiven, and thus both parties must swallow the same thing: their pride.

For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence." [[Wishful thinking](#), p. 28-29]

In a way, Buechner is talking about the healing quality of forgiveness – healing that leads to wholeness, for both parties. So too are our scripture lessons.

It is a moving scene where Joseph and his brothers embrace each other. Over the scene could be inscribed the words of Jesus from today's gospel reading. "Forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you."

There are at least a couple of things I want us to pay attention to here, in this story of Joseph and his brothers. First, when Joseph reaches out to forgive his brothers, it is the result of years of journeying. This is no instant forgiveness. In fact, when Joseph first recognizes his brothers, his persecutors, he hesitates, he tests them, he waits – I suspect he was working through a lot of anger and fear.

Secondly, at the end of the story, they have a good cry, and then they talk and talk and talk. In fact, it would take years of talking before the healing could be complete.

You see, forgiveness is not a magic wand, and it's not necessarily about forgetting. It's about working slowly and carefully through the memories and living through the pain together. Joseph and his brothers, even if they had wanted to, couldn't undo the past. Humpty Dumpty doesn't go back together again. But, by getting the poison out, Joseph and his brothers, his brothers and the father they had hurt desperately, could and did build a future together.

It's this second point that leads us to an important truth. Where there is no forgiveness, there is at best a limited, broken future – there may be no real future at all. Only a wandering around in the hurt and anger of the past.

There is something very sacred about forgiveness. Forgiveness means the freedom to be at peace within our own skins, again.

Jesus' "sermon on the plain" also talks about forgiveness and healing. Jesus taught that a forgiving love is like God's love. It reaches out to those who do not seem to deserve it; to our enemies, to those who hate and malign us, even to those who mistreat us.

I want to plunge in here with some very precise comments. This teaching of Jesus' is **not** about soft and passive submission to violence and abuse.

Statistics would have us realize that there are some of our number this morning, and some of our family members, and some of our neighbours who have been or are still being abused. Those who are or have been – and that may include you, it may include me, may find

Luke 6:28-29 very painful ... "pray for those who abuse you." Let me suggest to you, to us, that it may take a long time to work up the courage to get out of an abusive relationship, and sometimes it's the refusal to forgive – not yet – that gives us the strength to get out. The anger is OK. It is often the only power one has to be able to do what needs to be done – to be able to remove oneself from the abuse. It can even be the first step toward healing.

But then there is a second chapter – filled with more steps. That chapter has to do with getting on with one's life, of taking charge of one's life, of claiming the right to one's life. That chapter is entitled, forgiveness. We need to forgive so that we can move ahead. It doesn't happen easily. It doesn't happen quickly. And it doesn't happen till the problem has been resolved.

Someone once wrote, "Hatred, like acid, does more to destroy the container in which it is stored than to object on which it is poured." The abusers, the violators "deserve" to be hated, to have revenge poured on their heads – but at what cost to ourselves do we do it? How much of our present and our future do we forfeit, if we get stuck in the pain and anger and vengeance of the past?

I am talking again, still, about forgiveness, but I want to reiterate that forgiveness is **not** about saying, "Oh, it really wasn't that bad. Don't worry about it." It's about letting go of the power those who have hurt us have over us. It's about slowly, surely claiming our future and embracing wholeness for our lives – and it's about offering the opportunity for healing and wholeness to the other, to the enemy.

Forgiveness heals both – but it is no easy thing, no quick fix solution to the pain of injustice and injury. Let me close with a story:

In Mennonite circles, the story is often told of a woman whose daughter was abducted, raped and murdered. And this mother has been able to speak about her feelings and about forgiveness.

They never found the person who committed the crime. And the mother talks about her fantasies of finding this criminal, of shooting him, of seeing his blood, of crying out her rage. But then she also talks about letting go of that, slowly, and painfully letting go of her anger and the power that criminal has in her life – of forgiving him.

But it doesn't happen just once. The mother says that every year on the anniversary of her daughter's death, she goes through the process all over again. There's your "70 times 7" forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not a simple act, it is a process, a way of living, an attitude, a gift of grace – the beginning of healing for the forgiver as well as the forgiven.