

The Stages of Giving and Receiving Forgiveness

Johnnette Benkovic

Hello everyone, and welcome to this third week of Advent. Can you believe that we have gotten to this point already? My goodness sakes, Christmas Day is going to be here before we know it. Now, I want you to notice I'm wearing something today that is a little bit rose-colored, and that is because as we come into this third week of Advent, we're looking forward to the fact that our Lord is coming. It is that moment when we experience great joy in our hopes, knowing that our longing will soon be fulfilled in the coming of the Christ child. The last time that we were together, we began to explore this gray area of forgiveness. And I mentioned to you that there is a penitential character that accompanies the Advent season.

We don't often think of it that way, but indeed it has always been part of this season, though, as I shared with you the last time, lessened or less strict than we experience in the Lenten season. And it seems to me that of primary importance, as we make a movement forward in our life in Christ Jesus, is to shore up those areas of our soul that have been affected by the sins of others against us, and I must say by our own personal sin as well. It is in forgiveness and in extending mercy to others who have hurt us so desperately that we begin to make this forward movement. I must also say that it's also in taking that mercy that we receive from the sacrament of reconciliation and applying it to ourselves that we also feel this release from the bondage of actions that we have committed that have had such ill effects against us.

It occurred to me, as I gave some retrospective view towards the last time that we were together, that it might be helpful to talk about the stages of forgiveness. As we think about that, that could possibly lead us also to ask for forgiveness as well. Because my guess is, like me, I have indeed caused injury to others, either purposefully or inadvertently. Through the words that I've said, for the deeds that I have omitted, and thoughts perhaps that have not been in the best interest of another. If you can say "Yes, me too Johnnette," then I think that this particular time that we're going to spend together today looking at this third week of Advent is going to be absolutely beneficial and helpful to you.

So I have some notes here that I want to refer to, because I want to be as precise as I possibly can as we make our way through this particular discussion on forgiveness. Forgiveness can be a very, very difficult thing to do. And right here, I want to begin with a beautiful scripture passage that we find in Matthew 6 verse 14. And this is coming from our Lord Himself. He says ***"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father also will forgive you."***

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Now, those are amazing words, aren't they? It really sets up for us a great spiritual reality: that unless we forgive, or may I say even to the measure that we forgive, God is going to forgive us. If we want full forgiveness from God for all of the things that we have done that have offended Him, for all of the things that we have done that have affected our fellow neighbor, for all of the things that we have done that have affected ourselves, it is imperative, it is incumbent upon it, it is a nonnegotiable that we in fact must forgive. Because, as it says in another place in scripture, the measure that we measure with will be measured back to ourselves. Yikes, that's a news flash, and that should make us sit up very tall in our seats and take note.

So the question then is how can we forgive? What process do we engage to get to that point? And as I shared with you the last time, there are so many misconceptions that we have about forgiveness, and we begin to think that forgiveness is things that it is not. We begin to think that, you know, if we forgive somebody, it means that the evil that was perpetrated against us no longer matters. It means that we forgive and forget. Not a possibility for the human person may I say, unless we repress those emotions and those memories, which can lead us to greater travail. We might begin to think that there is no retribution that is necessary, or we might begin to believe that we've got to invite this person fully into our lives. But nothing could be further from the truth.

As we shared last time, forgiveness is a free will action. We choose to forgive, prompted by grace – we can't do it alone; it takes the divine light in us to be able to forgive. That sets us free from the consequence of sin, and that's the end result. When we make a decision to forgive, when we walk in the forgiveness that we have received and begin to extend that to another, then we feel the release of the hold that has been upon us through the action of the other against us. So how then do we begin to move forward in this process of forgiveness?

Well, in my notes, I have outlined for you a great, beautiful series of steps that were given to us in a beautiful new therapy that's called "Forgiveness therapy." The first thing we do is we express the emotion or hurt. It does us absolutely no good to pretend that we weren't affected. That's quite silly, isn't it? Especially when we see the ravages of that sin against us all around us. When we begin to recognize and realize we've been acting out of that sin, just as we talked about the last time, why would we then deny it? There is some kind of an interior release that occurs in us when we acknowledge the emotion or the hurt.

And how do we do that? Well, there are several ways that we can engage in this process, some of which I think kind of depend upon your temperament, what you're most comfortable doing. If you're kind of an introverted person who keeps his counsel to himself or herself, well, write it out. Sit down with your journal and

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

write it out. If you don't have a journal, get a journal. If you don't want to get a journal, which I highly recommend you should want to get a journal just to keep track of your own salvation story, you can sit there with pad and pencil. But write it out, put it down. "This is what I feel. This is the hurt that I perceive. This is how it has affected me."

Or, if you are a more verbal person who enjoys an exchange of ideas, if you're a communicator like myself, you might want to talk it over with a friend. This should not be any kind of a friend, this should be a true friend. A friend that is absolutely concerned about your eternal wellbeing, because that is what a true friend is about. A true friend is about your eternal salvation. So talk it out with a friend who you know loves you, cares for you, only wants the best for you, and that best has to do with eternal life. You could also talk it over with a confessor, a beautiful way to begin to, in a sacred space under the seal of confession, to talk about these things that are most concerning to you that have an effect maybe, perhaps even most damaged you.

I would want to say with regard to this, however, that this would not be the kind of thing that you would want to begin to explore during the normal reception of the sacrament of reconciliation. Because, you know, these things can take time, and when you're standing in the confession line, you know, we might be imposing upon an act of charity to tie the priest up so long that there's no time for others to get to confession. So I always like to recommend that in these moments, when we have serious matters to discuss, we make an appointment with a priest, right.

And I know there is something about anonymity in those moments that can help us so very, very much to feel secure, and I don't want to negate that possibility, but I do want to say this to you about that: There is also something that takes place in the dynamic of body language. You know, body language communicates too. So if we're sitting face-to-face – not my normal way preferring to receive the sacrament I just want to tell you. I kind of like the anonymity. I'm not so sure I can be very anonymous because my voice is known. But the fact of the matter is there's something about that anonymity that promotes us and helps us to speak more freely from the heart, right.

But when it's coming to these kinds of matters, when we want to talk about very serious situations, I have always found it helpful to go to confession face-to-face, especially when I've set up an appointment to do so. Why is that? Well, as I mentioned, you can read the body language of the priest. You can see in a certain way how he is receiving what you're saying. I hope and pray of course is that he's receiving what you're saying and what you're sharing from the beautiful perspective of paternal charity and spiritual fatherhood.

Additionally, however, he can also see you, right. He can see you too. And it's been, you know, I can't even tell you how many times that I have revealed some space in my heart that is needed to experience that healing presence of God, and

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

I've gone to confession face-to-face, and this holy priest of God, this man who is in persona Christi, will call me on it, and he'll say "Oh, wait, wait, wait, stop. I noticed something pass across your face. I think we need to sit and talk about this just a wee bit more deeply, right."

And so there's a benefit for the confessor to be able to read you as well, and I have always found that to make for a very heartfelt, sincere, authentic, and good confession, and I may say very good ways in which I can receive that grace of healing. It's promoted it. So I don't want you to dispose of that too quickly. And if you're going to speak with the confessor about these very deep things, I'm suggesting you make an appointment with that confessor. You can also talk about it with a spiritual director, and you can also talk to the person who injured you. What a concept is that! Go to the source, right, and share with that person, you know.

Now, a caveat on this too, if this person is a toxic person, a dangerous person, please do not do that. But if it's a spouse, or it's a child, even a good friend, you know, you might want to say "Look, it's time for us to have a little chitchat here. You know, I just want you to know that when you said thus and such, it really hurt me, and I want to have an opportunity for us to talk this out so that I can understand you more clearly, and you can understand me more clearly. And if there's any misunderstanding between us, or even, you know, a lack of forgiveness in one of our hearts about this event, that we can put it behind us and move forward." Wow. Now there's a conversation to have with a spouse. There's a conversation to have the opportunity to express it to a friend who has hurt you.

The next step that we want to take in this process is to exercise understand, all right. This is a big deal friends. When somebody has sincerely hurt is, oh my goodness, the last place we want to go is to try to understand why it is that they did to us. But as I say in my notes here, this is perhaps the most challenging step in the process, and psychologists call it "reframing." They actually have a name for it, it's reframing. It's reframing. It's resetting or recalibrating the lens through which we perceive the situation that's caused us such distress.

And, essentially, what is reframing? Essentially, it is choosing to reappraise what happened by considering other factors we may have ignored initially, right. That's a pretty big deal. That is not having a sympathy to the party that's injured us, it's really having an empathy. "What could have provoked such a serious action against me? What could have caused this to take place? If I were to be in that person's shoes, how would I interrupt all of this? What would I see perhaps about the situation that would provoke this response, and/or what could so seriously have gone wrong in this person's life that it could have yielded such action towards another."

So, you know, here's a little example that I'll give you in addition to those. For example, it is hard to forgive someone if we perceive his actions as only

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

malevolent and unloving. But, it may be easier to forgive that person if we see his/her actions as a result of this person's own deprived circumstances and personal limitations. So let's just choose a big, big example here. I like big examples. Let's suppose that you have been molested by another party. You can only be molested by another party. Let's suppose that happened to you. And, you know, you can look at that situation and you can say "This person is pure evil."

But every person is created in the image and likeness of God, every person is created for the good, every person has good about him/her, so is it really fair to say this person came from the pit of hell? Could it be that life circumstances caused such a thwarting of this own person's concept of who he/she is, or even so offended their dignity as a son or daughter of God that they acted in a way that they had experienced themselves? I think that if we think about that, we then can begin to experience even – please understand what I'm saying here – a type of compassion toward that person. Not a pass, not saying there shouldn't be retribution, not saying that in any way this exonerates a person, but it does help for us to see that it's very likely that somebody that hurts us so deeply and so severely was egregiously treated as well.

So that is... this concept of entering into an exercise of understanding is predicated, predicated upon this notion of reframing. Allowing our perception to grow large, right. Allowing our perception to be less myopic, but a little larger than that. Appropriate action still needs to be taken, please hear that, but it puts us in a position that we can follow one of the beautiful mandates that Jesus gives us. It puts us in a position where we can pray for our persecutor. That's a good thing. It frees us, it frees that party as well.

Alright, and so then the next step that we talk about here is forgive and cancel the debt. Forgive and cancel the debt. And this brings us to that beautiful moment where we make the decision to forgive. We've reframed it, we've prayed through this, we've expressed the emotion, we've expressed the hurt, and now we say "Okay Lord, I've been praying for the desire to desire to desire to forgive, and You've moved me along that continuum, and now I've arrived at this perfect moment in time when I can forgive." And what do we expect from that? Do we expect, you know, an immediate feeling of release? Well, we could get that. That's a great grace. And sometimes, on some level, we do experience that, but does that mean it's all over at that point? We're not created that way. That's not our makeup emotionally or psychological or spiritually, so that's not likely.

So we have to realize that that doesn't mean that the pain will automatically go away. It doesn't just evaporate. It can evaporate to some extent, but it doesn't, you know, just evaporate, right. And it doesn't mean that there won't be moments of regret or sadness, that the weight of what you've experienced in this unkind manner in which you were treated is not going to return. It will return. But maybe you've got something more now than you had before you forgave, and maybe that

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

mercy of God has so taken up residence within you that you're in a far better position to be able to move forward.

What does it mean then? It does mean that in those moments, we will admit, we will admit that God's grace is operative in us. We will admit that there is a profound way about how it is that we can begin to experience this release. It will enable us to see that there is light at the end of the rainbow, and as I shared with you in our last time together, the beautiful reality is that it puts us in a position now to forgive every time one of those memories pops up, one more way in which this person affected us reveals itself to us. And we make tremendous progress as we move forward. And that, indeed, is a great gift.

Just a couple of passages for you to think about, you know, as we come to this moment in time. Here, this is from Ephesians 4, 26-27: ***Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.*** That's Ephesians 4, 26-27. I really encourage you to mark that passage in your bible, return to it frequently because guess what? Here's a news flash. We have to forgive a whole lot of times. One person over and over again perhaps, but, come on. We're all going to experience the wrath of another at one point in time, we're all going to be on the short end of the stick, we're all going to have the need for that again.

I want to remind you as well to, you know, allow yourself to begin to enter into the passion of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in this situation. One of my favorite accounts of the Passion of our Lord, Jesus Christ, for healing comes from Mark's Gospel. And if you go into Mark's Gospel, and you go through that passion, you're going to see there that there are words that apply to just about every kind of pain and suffering that we can experience as a human person: emotional pain, psychological pain, spiritual pain, ridicule, mockery, abandonment. You're going to see it all there.

It's been a very useful exercise for me in years passed to sit with Mark's Gospel and to circle, underline if you prefer, all of those words that have to do with the sufferings that our Lord experienced. And for me, at any given moment in time, when I am suffering from a similar kind of affliction, to realize that Jesus took that to the cross for me. So I want to recommend to you the whole of Saint Mark's Gospel in terms of the passion there, to dip into that and to see what God has to say to you in the midst of it all. I do want to share with you too that in knowing what steps are necessary to forgive, we can also then begin to affect those in the life of another when we need to ask for forgiveness. And my guess is we all need to do that.

So as we come to this beautiful week, and enter into this beautiful week that is the beautiful time in which we see, you know, Jesus coming in the not too distant future, and we rejoice, right, we rejoice in that light that is always upon us, let us let that same light illuminate all of the areas of our heart where we need to

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

forgive. May we follow these steps, may we experience that profound, profound release that comes through forgiveness, and may we seek that same forgiveness for others.