

It Stops Here! **[Deeper Sheet 6.28.09]**

Read Luke 23

Why does forgiveness evoke so much in us? It often triggers deep, visceral feelings. A name or a face immediately rushes into our consciousness. In a nanosecond we're transported back to the place where they said whatever it was they said or did whatever it was they did. And whatever "it" was, it was destructive and left a path of wreckage. We know the path all too well—whenever forgiveness comes to mind, we relive the wreckage like an unholy liturgy accompanied by anger or rage. It's strange, then, to see that in the midst of being tortured, mocked, and crucified, Jesus' mind was on forgiveness: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

What is it that makes Jesus capable of responding with forgiveness to such gross mistreatment? Or, for that matter, what is it that makes people who have been harmed profoundly capable of forgiving? It seems that forgiveness has a liturgy of its own and that we're only capable of forgiveness when we're rooted in a Christ pattern of death and rebirth. If we stand any chance of becoming the kind of people who forgive, we've got to remind ourselves continually of the liturgy of forgiveness: *Forgiveness isn't condoning what someone did. Forgiveness isn't forgetting what happened. Neither does forgiveness always mean reconciliation. Nor does forgiveness mean that justice and consequences get tossed out the window. But forgiveness is always personal, and forgiveness is always a process.*

There are endless ways to deal with the baggage that people hand us. One option is to hand it back, which is basically revenge. What follows is a game of relational pong: "You take it." "No. You take it." The wreckage just gets handed back and forth. Or there is passive revenge: the cold shoulder or the silent treatment. Still others have decided to pass the baggage around. Rather than carry it themselves, they share the wreckage with everyone around them. They blow up over trivial things. The anger seethes just below the surface, and because it has nowhere to go, even a slight infraction leads to an eruption. Then there is the option of simply carrying the baggage everywhere you go and in time, coming to define yourself by how you've been hurt.

To forgive, to willingly choose not to direct rage and fury at the people who've harmed you, is immensely painful. Tim Keller said, "It's like a death, but it's a death that leads to resurrection." Resurrection is the transformation of the wrong that was done. Parker Palmer suggests that forgiveness is a way of "absorbing and transforming pain". Essentially, the cross says, "The pain stops here." The cross transforms the ugly, soul-destroying things that we're handed into creative power. After his two grandchildren were gunned down in an Amish school, the grandfather was asked how it was possible to forgive the gunman. He responded simply, "Through God's help." Forgiveness is not a trite idea. It costs dearly, and it is possible only when we are rooted in a Christ pattern of death and rebirth.

Consider some of the options of dealing with pain in the third paragraph above. Where do you see yourself in these options?

Why do you think forgiveness "feels like a kind of death"?

Think for a moment about Parker Palmer's suggestion that forgiveness "absorbs and transforms pain". Where have you seen pain that has been transformed into something good in your life? In the life of someone you know? In culture?

In Luke 7:47, Jesus makes a connection between forgiveness and the capacity to love, saying, "whoever has been forgiven little loves little." What have you done that you need to be forgiven for?

Who do you need to track down and make things right with?