

Forgiveness is hard, and seemingly, getting harder. While I'm fine with powerful people facing the consequences for harming others, and indeed I wish it happened faster and more consistently, I'm concerned by an article I read that crystallized something I'd been feeling about our society. Far from holding powerful abusers to account, our society increasingly seems to revel in condemning public figures for the smallest slip-ups, even when they happened decades ago, even when they didn't hurt anyone in particular, even when those figures have lived good lives and consistently contributed to society since then, and even when those figures have made brave confessions and heartfelt apologies. Online, people egg each other on, rewarding such condemnations with approving attention. If it didn't feel good in the moment, people wouldn't do it so much, but I'm more concerned about the long-term consequences of the disappearance of forgiveness as a social norm.

But that raises the question. Why is forgiveness so hard? Secular society might discourage forgiveness because it does not understand what forgiveness is. Society seems to confuse forgiveness with indulgence or weakness. Seeking or giving forgiveness for something isn't saying that the thing is OK, but acknowledging that it's not. Even though I know that intellectually, I find it hard to forgive myself for lapses, even though I know God and others have forgiven me, and in some cases, others might not even know or remember that I failed to live up to my own expectations. Although my desire is to be driven by the spirit of Christ, I wonder to what extent I might have internalized the spirit of the age.

I'm inclined to agree with Ann Widdecombe, the author of the article I mentioned, who posits that this is evidence "of the decline of Christianity, with social media now unchaining a culture of judgment and condemnation."\* She explicitly says she is not talking about actual abuse, which must never be tolerated, but incidents where no one was hurt, and the individual at fault has tried to make things right.

A friend of mine pointed out that these incidents can be emotionally disturbing to individuals with particular sensitivities, but I'm only talking about a societal phenomenon, not specific individual interactions. And I believe Mrs. Widdecombe is correct that what we're seeing now, "This passion for vengeance is a direct product of mass departure from the teachings of Christ with their emphasis on repentance, forgiveness and the danger of judging others."\*

She wrote, "When the Dutch woman Corrie ten Boom shook hands [in 1946!] with the guard who had tortured her in Ravensbrück concentration camp, the public reaction was of admiration. Fast forward several decades and the reaction to Eva Kor, a Jewish lady, forgiving 94-year-old Oskar Gröning, a bookkeeper at Auschwitz who had no direct role in the atrocities, was one of loud disbelief. Forgiveness is now regarded as odd and when one argues for it, the response is one of incomprehension."\*

If we regard forgiveness strictly as a matter of inner piety, this incomprehension will only get worse. In the Gospel reading, we just got a quick review of Christ's

teachings on forgiveness, so now, we are responsible for sharing those teachings with the world. Both in deed *and* in word, for especially in this area, our words and our deeds must be one and the same. Practicing forgiveness, and encouraging others to do likewise, is part of our joyful and liberating obedience to Jesus Christ. But take care that your practice and advocacy for forgiveness is pure, and does not turn the ironic corner of judging other people for not forgiving. Even well-intentioned judgment falls under “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.” I did open by saying, forgiveness is hard.

Harder still when you think of some of the confusion surrounding these issues, which has allowed this passage, perversely, to be abused as a protection of abusers. So let’s get that out of the way. This text has been abused to condone all manner of abuse, to disempower victims. “Turn the other cheek” has been twisted into “shut up and take it.” That interpretation is wrong. How can I, a priest of the yes-and, generous orthodoxy, radically inclusive Episcopal church, say that anyone’s interpretation of scripture is wrong? Three reasons come to mind.

One reason is context. These sayings assume a level of agency. Not everyone in Jesus’s audience had two garments to part with, let alone money to lend. Jesus preached both to beggars and to people who could choose to give to beggars, but when he says, “Give to everyone who begs from you,” it’s clear that he’s addressing only the latter. By the same token, one who is being abused has, by definition, been deprived of agency, at least in that particular aspect of their life, and thus, these sayings are not applicable. The second is that God loves all humanity, and does not want any of us to suffer. Even with the worst sinners, God desires repentance, not punishment, and God has special compassion for those who are already suffering. The third reason is much simpler: evil cannot come out of good, and condoning abuse is evil, so the interpretation cannot be good. Or as Jesus said, you know the tree by its fruits. So let’s move on to the confusion.

We tend to confuse forgiveness and reconciliation. As my friend Fr. Rich Andre wrote, “forgiveness is not the same thing as full reconciliation. It is not always appropriate to restore the relationship to a previous state as if the wrong had never happened. ... [One] can’t achieve full reconciliation until the other person admits what they’ve done, said they’re sorry, and truly demonstrated that they have changed.”\*\*

Sometimes full reconciliation is impossible. The person with whom we would seek reconciliation might be dead or otherwise unreachable, or they might be so toxic that seeking reconciliation with them would be dangerous. But we can always choose to forgive. Even if your enemies reject your love, you can still pray for them — give them over to God, and trust that God’s love will ultimately win out for them, as we pray it might for us, even though we don’t always see or understand what God’s love is doing in our own lives, let alone the lives of others.

Forgiveness is hard like a diamond-bit drill, boring cleanly through the cold stone

of our hearts, through the self-righteous anger that feels so good, looks so shiny, but is really just a chain around our souls. Those who have forgiven, or been forgiven, offenses great or small, know what a powerfully liberating experience forgiveness can be.

Jesus reminds us that while we might wearily accept the limitations, brokenness, and perversion of human nature, which is often reluctant to forgive, we should remember that God is different. For our own sake and for the sake of our neighbors, we should aspire to be as Godly as we can, to give and forgive without fear, and we should be encouraged by the thought that even when we cannot bring ourselves to meet this high standard, God always does. God is not just merciful, but generous, including being generous with forgiveness, even to those who make themselves enemies of God. We're better off when we act more like God and less like the bad behavior that is normalized in this life. God's ways are life-giving, and God is present in all generosity, all forgiveness, all grace.

\*<https://catholicherald.co.uk/magazine/a-culture-of-condemnation-has-replaced-christian-forgiveness/>

\*\*<https://www.facebook.com/rich.andre.79/posts/10156629930728564>