

(W)holy, (W)holy, (W)holy
Health, Healing and Wholeness
December 2011

“Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’” (Matthew 18:21-22; NRSV)

Forgive ... such a small word, yet so hard to comprehend and to put into practice! Though it is changing, there is still relatively little research on the direct connection between forgiving and health – no direct evidence that proves once-and-for-all that holding a grudge leads to long-term health problems. There is however, a great deal of scientific evidence that **does** exist on the health affects of depression, anxiety, and anger – by-products of the hurt and betrayal felt when someone has wronged us – increased blood pressure, increase in heart rate, the release of hormones that trigger out fight-or-flight reactions, headache, stomach problems, sleeplessness – all occurring whenever we allow the painful episode to rewind and replay over and over in our minds.

We compound these effects whenever we allow the ‘things we wish we’d said’ to roll across our tongues as we smack our lips at the thought of retribution. The result is that we begin to stew in our own juices, and the one who actually gets hurt is us. Rev. Dr. Lewis Smedes once said, “To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and to discover the prisoner was you.” Forgiveness, as well as its opposites, resentment and revenge, all begin the same way – **with a decision**.

Lest we confuse the two, let’s begin by saying that forgiveness **does not** mean forgetting! It does not sanction or justify the actions of the one who has deeply wounded us, and does not release the other person from responsibility - or in some cases, even legal punishment. Those who forgive are not fools – it doesn’t mean that the relationship can, or even should, go back to the same as prior to the incident. Instead, forgiveness empowers **us** to take responsibility for our own future happiness. The process may not be easy, and likely will not adhere to a set time-table - we may even find we need to work and re-work our way through it. In some cases, forgiving can be extremely difficult, so it may be wise to find someone trained to assist in the process – someone we trust, such as our pastor or a therapist.

The important point is that we don’t have to wait for the other party to say they are sorry – we could have a rather long wait - one that leaves **us** stuck with the pain. Instead, with God’s grace, working through the process of forgiving empowers us to become the ones who determine when the healing begins; that typically means allowing ourselves to feel the full impact of the pain incurred. Trying to forget and push the resulting emotions out of our awareness, only leads to repressed feelings that can later manifest themselves in other emotional or physical ways (for example, chronic headaches, depression, ulcers or in some extremes, substance abuse).

The bottom line is this; recognizing the fact that we can forgive the person without forgiving his/her actions, takes away that individual’s power over us, and in the process allows us to no longer be held captive to the role of being a victim. Through prayer, scripture, and openness to the Spirit, God reminds us that He has come to us - to journey with us to healing and release from the pain that has made us captive. Consider forgiveness to be the gift that you give yourself this Christmas. Take that first step. Emmanuel has come to accompany you on your journey toward wholeness in body, mind and spirit.

May God’s Blessing be with you and your loved ones during this season of joy.

Debbie Best