

GROWING Together

FORGIVENESS: MYTHS AND MYSTERY

There's a children's story called "The Hurt". In it, a young boy is bullied on the playground and comes home hurt. Rather than sharing 'the hurt', he hides it in his room where it grows bigger as he adds to it and refuses to share his pain. Finally, the hurt has grown so big that no more room is left for him in his bedroom. In desperation, he goes to his father, and shares his hurt. He learns that hurts must be let go or else they will grow, pushing us out of our very own selves. ^[i]

While this may be a story meant for children, it holds deep wisdom. Hurts do tend to grow, pushing us away from our true selves if they are nursed and hidden. Hurts must be let go through the process of forgiveness. Forgiveness, however, is sometimes misunderstood. Examining some of the myths around forgiveness will better allow us to enter into its mystery.

Myth #1: "It's better to forgive and forget."

The problem with the "forgive and forget" approach is that it short-circuits the process. The process of forgiveness requires us to face the hurt we have experienced, moving beyond the denial inherent in this approach. Better to allow ourselves to feel the pain and re-member ourselves by remembering the story of our hurt. We can choose to share that story in a safe place. Unlike the little boy in our story, we expose the hurt so that it doesn't have the chance to grow and create a distance between us and our true, best selves.

Myth #2: Forgiveness and reconciliation are one and the same.

While forgiveness is a necessary first step toward reconciliation, these two processes must be kept distinct. Forgiveness will not always lead to reconciliation with the perpetrator of the hurt. Indeed, in cases where abuse is involved, reconciling with the perpetrator may not be possible.

At the same time, forgiveness is not dependent on how the person being forgiven reacts. To forgive another is a deeply personal and prayerful act, a conscious choice to let go of the hurt.

Myth #3: Forgiveness overlooks bad, abusive, or oppressive behaviour.

Actually, the opposite is true. Forgiveness calls us to find a non-violent way of resisting the hurtful act. Until the offense ceases, forgiveness is premature. Metaphorically speaking, forgiveness requires two "hands". One hand is held up to say: "Stop! What you are doing is unjust". The other hand reaches out and reminds the perpetrator of his/her innate humanity and calls forth the better person. The challenge of forgiveness is to use

both hands equally. Using only the hand of justice might result in retaliation, the 'eye for an eye' mentality. Using only the hand of tenderness risks allowing an injustice to continue, allowing ourselves to carry the shame of behaviour which is not our own. Rather, justice and mercy must walk hand in hand.



Let us turn now to the mystery of forgiveness.

Forgiving is hard. Ultimately, it must be fuelled by faith in the mystery of Christ's life, death and resurrection. That mystery teaches us that hurt and betrayal are part of the human experience, an experience that God in Jesus is willing to share. That mystery also teaches us that life trumps death, good overcomes evil, and that love is more powerful than hate. Forgiveness calls us to enter into the fullness of this mystery, trusting that even the most hurtful circumstances, given over to God, can lead to new life.

^[i] Doleski, Teddi. *The Hurt*. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983.)

