

GROWING

Together

Re-Thinking Forgiveness

It may be time to re-think forgiveness. I meet very few people who are tormented by an unsatisfied longing to have their sins forgiven or by fear for the destination of their immortal souls. The spectre of eternal damnation just doesn't seem to move people like it used to. We've all gone shopping instead.

Perhaps it is our secular age. Maybe it's the economy or the Me Generation. Whatever the cause, people don't seem to agonize over how to achieve a state of divine forgiveness that will gain them entry through the heavenly portal. It's all just so ... medieval.

That's not to say that clergy should stop preaching guilt and forgiveness. Prison ministries thrive on it, as do professional football teams, or so it seems. But the average law-abiding, middle-class pew sitter is no longer motivated by a deep-seated yearning to be forgiven for a litany of offences against God. Certainly nothing that would match the quest for forgiveness experienced by Christian heroes of the past, such as the Apostle Paul or Martin Luther. We need a new approach, one that speaks to this age.

We are, of course, as burdened by guilt as the people of any other era. But the guilt we bear is more personal than metaphysical – our shame is that we are not thin enough, not beautiful enough, not cool enough. Our phones aren't smart enough, and neither are we. Guilt. As parents, we feel inadequate. As middle-class people, we feel unworthy of the good life we enjoy. More guilt. When it comes to climate change or the global economy, we feel trapped by circumstances that don't seem right to us but that we don't know how to fix. And more guilt. And increasingly, it seems, we don't know how to move past the incidents in our lives that cause us pain – the hurt caused by divorce, sibling rivalry, back-stabbing friends or colleagues,

our own poor choices, even the inconvenience caused by the idiot in the next lane who doesn't know how to drive.

For the most part, the question believers are asking is no longer, "How can I be forgiven?" but rather, "How can I forgive?" The parishioner who visits her minister or priest, distraught over a split in her family or some unresolved anger for something someone did or said, will not be satisfied to learn that her sins are forgiven. She's stuck, and she wants to know how to move on. Fortunately, our faith provides a way to get ourselves "unstuck."

And the surprise of it is that the brand-new formula for forgiving others is an old-fashioned awareness of having been forgiven. It's like Christmas – our delight in receiving presents makes us want to give them. Forgiveness by God's grace is the ultimate gift, perhaps the only thing we ever get that's worth way, way more than we paid for it. And it's that very awareness that enables us to move past the hurts in our lives and, eventually, to forgive. The most patient drivers are those who remember that they, too, made mistakes that others let go.

Discovering how to let go of hurt or anger is one of life's great lessons, rivaled only by the knack of accepting others as they are and – even more difficult – accepting ourselves as we are. In each case, the door between success and failure swings on hinges greased by forgiveness. The great message of our faith to this generation is not that we are forgiven, but rather that, because we are forgiven, we can forgive.



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