

Living with Forgiveness

We will view this video clip from a 2006 episode of the television program Inside Edition about forgiveness. Kai Leigh Harriott and her mother Tonya David are both heroes of forgiveness.

How does a person do what that little girl and her mother have done? How did they move through the pain and disappointments, and cruelties of life, and emerge, not only able to willingly forgive, but apparently relieved of the tremendous burden of resentment and self-pity, and bitterness, that might easily have weighed them down?

Forgiveness is a major issue for people. It is also mysterious, and difficult. There are lots of books, and theories about it. I am sure that millions of sermons have been preached on the subject. Probably a disproportionate number have been about God forgiving us, and not nearly as many on how we forgive ourselves, or how we forgive others. That's too bad, because forgiveness is not just something we receive, it is something we take an active part in.

In a few minutes we will watch Kylee's story again.

I want to introduce some thoughts about forgiveness adapted from a book by spiritual director and priest named Albert Haase.

Haase would say that the tendency we have to hold a grudge, or to see revenge on the person we feel has harmed us, is like the tip of an iceberg- the bit that shows is connected to something that goes much deeper within us, some wound, or memory, or pattern of thought, that requires healing.

He uses an example from end of the story of the Prodigal Son, which we heard a few minutes ago. When the elder son shows his anger, and refuses to attend the homecoming party, his outburst reveals something that has been brewing inside him for a long time.

" 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "

It would seem like the elder son has never felt secure in his father's love. He felt under-appreciated, and unable to experience his father's approval. (This makes me wonder why the younger son was so eager to leave his father's house. Maybe it was that way for him, as well!)

On the surface, it might appear that the elder son is resentful of his younger brother. He may be, and he may take it out on him- but the real problem has more to do with his father.

Albert Haase names things that he has found to be necessary for real healing to take place.

The first is an external source of love. We need to know that we are unconditionally loved, and that there are no limits on that love. Haase talks about the presence of a loving, compassionate Christ. Others might prefer to talk about God, or Spirit, or just Love. (We may catch a glimpse, a hint of that love in community, in close friendship, in deep prayer.) Love comes from a source beyond us.

The second thing is an honest review of the past event. In the case of the eldest brother, he would need to look at the real source of his wound- which lies in his relationship with his father, not with his little brother. He might be able to talk this out with his father, or he might not.

Haase says that many of the harmful things people do, abuse of sex or alcohol, uncontrollable anger, workaholic busyness are not usually the real problems. They are what people do to cope, or deal, with the real problems.

We often carry wounds that were inflicted long ago, and it may not be possible to clear the air with the person we feel has hurt us. They may have died, or may have been a part of our life a long time ago.

It takes courage to look at these things. But neglected wounds do not heal, or go away by themselves. They are still there, under the surface, festering, and causing further infection.

We still need to look closely at what happened- perhaps with the help of a counsellor, or therapist, or spiritual director, and in Haase's words, allow the "light of Christ"- the love of God, shine on the wounded places within.

The third thing needed, in Haase's understanding, is compassion, when we are able to step out of ourselves for a moment, out of the pain and anger, and sense of betrayal, to understand the person who has hurt us.

The little girl in the video clip shows us that step. In her victim impact statement, she says that the man who fired the weapon whose bullet ultimately paralyzed her, did not mean to do it, was not trying to hurt her.

This is not an attempt to make excuses for the person who caused the pain. What he did was wrong. But she shows a willingness to understand things from inside his skin, with the awareness that every person makes mistakes.

That brings us to the part of the Lord's Prayer that calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven. It would be whole different dynamic if Jesus had taught us to pray, "Forgive us God, even as continue to judge others..."

Forgiving, and being forgiven, are connected. If we are willing to let go of the desire for revenge, to get even, and can begin to have compassion for the person who has hurt us, and even hope that things can get better for them- we make the move the little girl has made. She has stepped beyond being a victim, and has become a means of grace.

The story has been re-written in at least two ways. Anthony Warren, the man who pulled the trigger, can be seen as a person who made a big mistake, but who can still be loved, and forgiven. There is hope for him. Kai Leigh can be seen, not just as the victim, but as a person who has the power to forgive, and to teach, and to change lives.

There is the possibility of new life for the people in this story. Let's watch it again.

In a time of quiet reflection, remember an area of your own life where there is the need for the healing work of forgiveness.

I will break the silence by leading us into praying the Lord's Prayer together.

Time of Silent Reflection

Praying the Lord's Prayer slowly, a line at a time.

The Lord's Prayer

Our father, who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,

the power and the glory,

forever and ever. Amen