

**“Forgiving is not forgetting.” Pastor Robert Yutzy**

**8/19/2024 – Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church**

Forgiving someone who has caused us harm is not easy.

C.S. Lewis helps us see that when he wrote, *“Forgiveness is a lovely idea...until you have something to forgive.”*

And yet, Jesus makes it sound so simple.

In Matthew 6 where Jesus teaches the disciples the prayer we have come to know as the Lord’s prayer, we are told to pray, **“forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.”**

Did you ever think about how we are actually qualifying the way God will forgive us even as we pray this prayer?

The word “As” is an adverb. Adverbs tell us how an action is being done. Easily, quickly, suddenly.

“As” means in the (same) way that.”

So, when Jesus says, pray in this manner, the line about forgiveness could read.

*And forgive us our debts “in the same way that” we have forgiven our debtors.*

And Jesus makes this even more clear at the end of the prayer in the very next verse where he says,

*14 “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

It feels much more comfortable to complete the Lord’s prayer with, *“For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”*

That wording is not in the earliest and most reliable manuscripts. Bible scholars have proposed that the early church used this prayer as a liturgy and added “For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever” as a way to make it similar to other liturgies. Then transcribers added this wording to the later manuscripts so that it was in harmony with the practice of the church.

I don’t blame them. To end with *“if you don’t forgive others, God will not forgive you”* is kind of a downer of a liturgy. It leaves us in a hole wondering if there is a way out.

The disciples struggled with this too. In Luke 17:3, Jesus says to the disciples:

Luke 17:3 NIV “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. 4 Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”

5 The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

The disciples knew what it was to harbor resentments, and that it required an additional increase of faith to comply with this requirement of Jesus' teaching. It is so contrary to our natural feelings and definitely contrary to how we see people treating each other in our world of an eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth mentality.

Jesus answers them by saying you only need a mustard seed size of faith to be able to say to a mulberry tree: *'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.* For some of us one of the greatest challenges to our faith is offering forgiveness to someone who has hurt us terribly. It can feel just as hopeless as telling a mountain to be cast into the sea let alone a mulberry tree. Jesus words are an encouragement that it isn't about the size of our faith; just our willingness to offer forgiveness.

And we hold all of this struggle up alongside the words of Paul who carries on the ministry of Christ to the church at Colossae and writes in Colossians 3: *"Forgive as the Lord forgave you."* And we may edit it as with the Lord's prayer to say, *"Forgive 'in the same way that' the Lord forgave you."*

Because this is so hard, we often don't have words for it and can find it much easier to latch onto the myth that I just need to forgive and forget.

### ***Forgive and Forget***

It sounds like such a spiritual act...just forget it and all will be well.

### ***Forgive and Forget***

*"Forgive as the Lord forgave you."*

*"Forgive and Forget in the same manner as the Lord has Forgives and Forgets your sins."*

Is that not what God does? Forgive and forget? Actually, no.

You will not find anywhere in Scripture where God forgets our sin. And I do not believe that God is asking us to do anything that God doesn't do in regard to forgiving someone who sins against us.

We find references like

Psalm 103:12 NRSVUE

as far as the east is from the west,

so far he removes our transgressions from us.

Isaiah 43:25 NRSVUE

I alone am the one

who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,

and I will not remember your sins.

Removing our sins from us and choosing to not remember them is not the same thing as forgetting them.

If we would forget what has happened to us, there would be no growth, no maturity, only repeating the same stories again and again and again. There would be no cries for justice and putting things right. Changes leading to better governance and better societies and better ways of behaving as families and as congregations would be almost impossible.

It would be like always stepping into the same pothole every morning because there is no memory of it from the day before.

### **To forgive and forget can be an invitation to denial.**

We simply don't know how to return to being in relationship again or how we can ever return to a nurturing reciprocal interdependent community so we latch on to a cliché like Forgive and Forget thinking this is the best we can do.

So now that we have dug that hole of just how hard forgiveness is, can Jacob and Esau give us and hand to get back up?

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Let us review just a bit about the story of Jacob and Esau. They were the twin brothers born to Isaac and Rebekah. Esau was born first but Jacob's hand was around Esau's ankle as he came out. And we never say Esau and Jacob; the traditional order is Jacob and Esau. Jacob means heel grabber – an idiom for someone who deceives, someone you can't quite trust. It would be a foreboding sign that Jacob would be a person who liked to be in control, and he was willing to manipulate people to get that control. He is always making a bargain and usually taking advantage of someone to get what he wants.

Jacob stole Esau's blessing by disguising himself as Esau, and Isaac fell for it and blessed Jacob believing he was Esau.

When Esau found out what happened, he made a vow that once his father had died, he would kill Jacob. So, Rebekah helped Jacob flee to her brother Laban's home in Haran *“until Esau forgets what Jacob had done to him.”*

We know Esau is not going to forget and neither was Jacob.

Jacob stayed away for 20 years, and he became very wealthy and much of that wealth came by deceiving his father-in-law Laban. You can read about that in Genesis 30.

He marries two of Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel. Laban promised to give his younger daughter, Rachel, to Jacob but tricked Jacob into marrying the older daughter, Leah, at the wedding celebration. Only then did Laban give Rachel in marriage to Jacob. More deception, more mistrust, more favoritism – because Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah.

Jacob became wealthy by slowly transferring all the best livestock from Laban to himself by taking the ones in an agreed upon deal that were streaked, spotted, or speckled. Jacob bred the strongest of the livestock to give birth to striped, spotted and speckled offspring. Laban began to be suspicious of Jacob the “heel grabber.”

And then God enters the picture again and tells Jacob it is time for him to “go back to the land of your fathers and your relatives, and I will be with you.”

If you remember from the last message I preached that Jacob had fled from Esau and that he came to a certain place (he stopped because he lost light – the sun went down), on a rocky mount, and had a dream where he saw a ladder or stair going up to heaven with the angels of the Lord descending and ascending on it, he was convinced that *“Surely God is in this place and did not know it”* and named it Bethel. Even after that as he described this *“awesome”* experience, and hearing God’s voice tell him God will be with him and bring him back safely to his home, even with all of that, Jacob was not yet ready to give up control. He doesn’t say “I will put my trust in you.” What he says is *“IF...IF... “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God.”*

Twenty years had not dimmed the memory of why Jacob had fled his home in the first place. When he is informed that Esau is coming to meet him along with four hundred men. Jacob is extremely fearful and very distressed. He still isn’t sure if God will be able to deliver him safely back home.

Jacob strategically arranges his family and livestock by putting his female servants and their children out front, then Leah and her children, and behind the whole procession was Rachel and Joseph. More favoritism – seemingly the status quo of the family system.

Was Esau coming to make good on his vow to kill Jacob?

And Jacob sees Esau, not coming to him with his men in arms, but running toward him alone.

And to Jacob’s shock and surprise, Esau throws his arms around him and embraces him and kisses him.

It is important to note that when Jacob stole Esau’s blessing, Isaac asked Jacob to come and embrace him and kiss him a sign of the family bond and blessing. But Jacob’s kiss was more of a betrayal than affirming a bond.

For Esau to kiss Jacob was a way of reversing this betrayal and bringing back the familial bond that they shared.

What an absolute shock that must have been for Jacob, and Jacob says something very telling.

Jacob finally realizes that God has been with him. God did bring him safely back home. Not back home to his brother’s cold shoulder but to his brother’s warm embrace, He was embraced by his twin brother who had experienced just how awful and despicable of a person Jacob could be and yet still loved him.

Jacob tells Esau, ***“To see your face is like seeing the face of God.”***

That embrace took twenty years to get to.

20 years!

I hope this can help us see that we need flexibility when we are dealing with the breakdown of relationships and to recognize that reconciliation is not a straight line. Our efforts to restore relationships may take many turns and healing may be the most difficult work that we do.

Jesus said that following him will require each of us to carry our own cross. It was Jesus' willingness to forgive his captors and executioners that kept him on his cross. To kill the very Son of God is an indescribably deplorable act. And yet, Jesus in effect said, "Father, do not seek 'requit' for what they are doing, they don't understand their actions or who I am. I will accept the loss as my own on their behalf."

That is what makes forgiveness so difficult. We have to come to terms with taking a loss that is really someone else's responsibility.

Forgiveness does not mean we are saying it is okay.

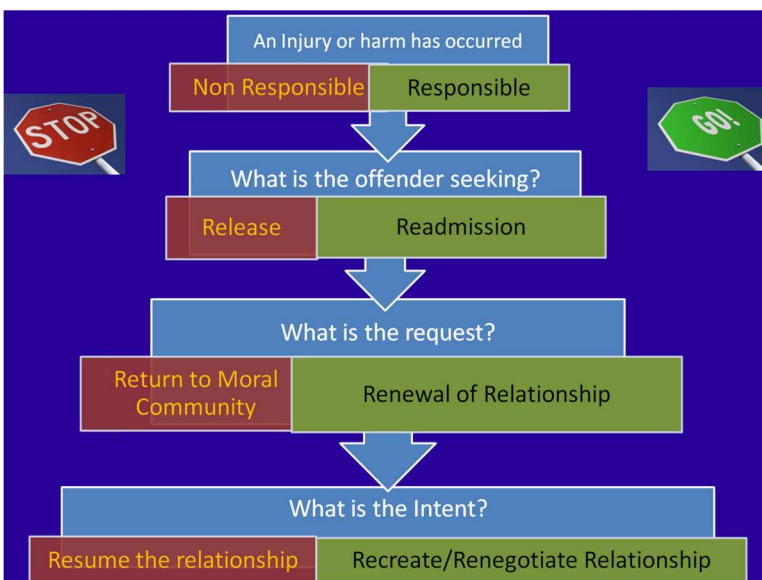
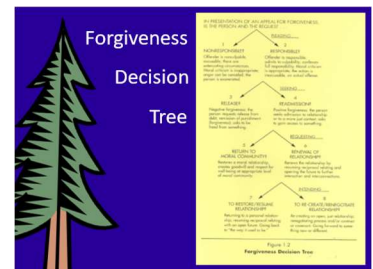
Forgiveness is not saying you never think of it again.

Forgiveness is not acting as if nothing ever happened.

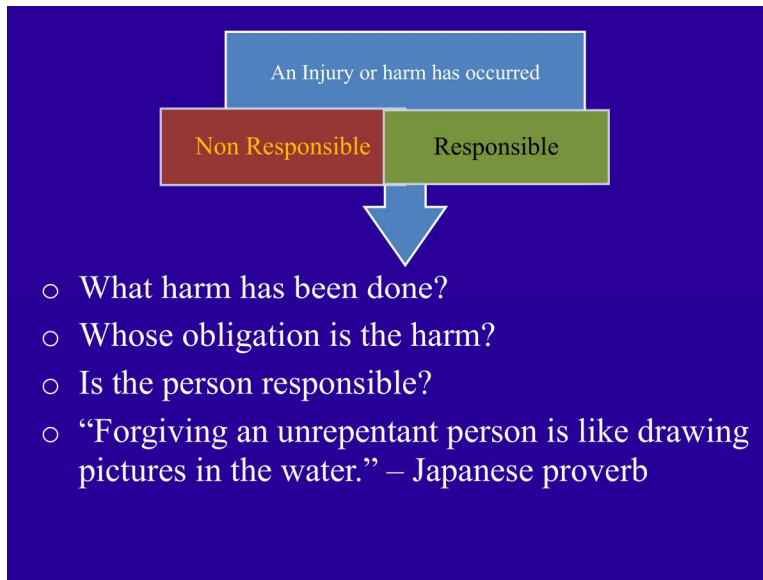
Forgiving is giving up my right to requital, my right to demand punishment, or to have something said or done in response to the harm.

I want to share a teaching from the late David Augsberger on forgiveness that I have found very helpful in understanding that the goal is to get to forgiveness and reconciliation but to forgive will not guarantee reconciliation will even be possible. And even if there is reconciliation, it may not ever mean returning to a reciprocal relationship or sense of real community.

Augsberger describes this work with a model called the forgiveness tree in his book, *Helping People Forgive*.<sup>1</sup> It's hard to read on such a small picture so I am going to expand it in individual slides.



The goal is to make it from the top of the tree to the bottom but notice with each step down, the journey to reconciling can get stopped or perhaps better said, "stuck." At each level there must be agreement from both parties to enable the journey to continue. Here is a brief overview of each step.



The first step is to name the harm. Whose obligation is the harm or who bears responsibility? It may be that it was accidental such as child spilling their milk. If the person is responsible, does the person recognize the harm?

We are so good at not taking responsibility when we hurt others.

We do it through little turns of phrases or scripts that we learn from each other such as:

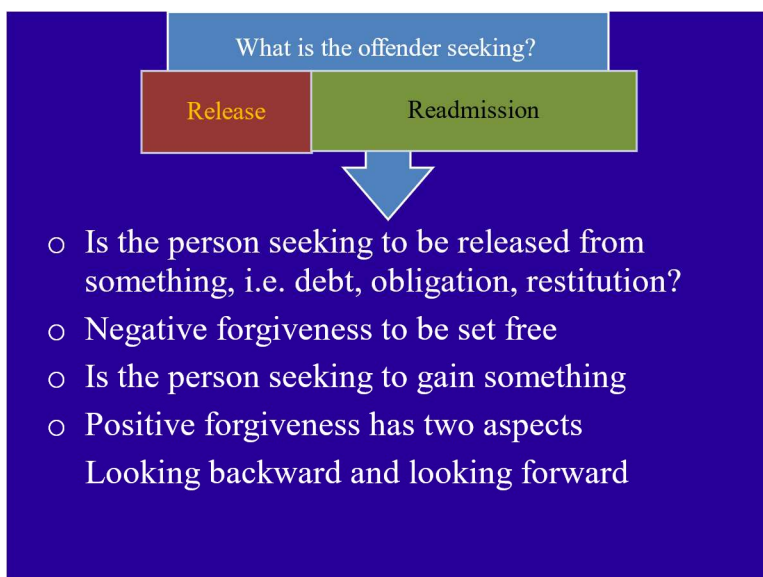
**I’m sorry if I offended you.** I didn’t mean to hurt you. You didn’t

need to take it that way. This puts the responsibility for the loss on the one who was hurt. They wouldn’t have had to be offended or hurt. If you were offended by that, it’s your own problem. It’s on you.

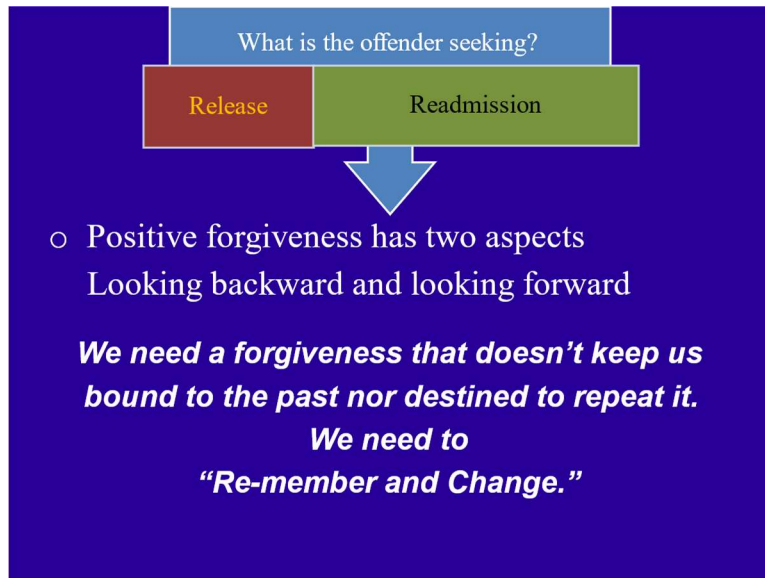
If the person responsible for the harm is not willing to recognize the harm and take responsibility for it, the journey to reconcile stops here. Forgiveness can still be offered, but until the other person takes responsibility, there is no further movement. As the Japanese proverb says, “Forgiving an unrepentant person is like drawing pictures in the water.”

If the person is willing to take responsibility for the harm and can say, I am sorry that I hurt you (so different than saying sorry “if” I offended you) then you go on to the next step.

Now the person is taking responsibility for their actions.



Now begins the work of defining what a continued relationship will look like. The offender has taken responsibility but what is it they want now? Do they just want release? They have admitted wrong, do want forgiveness, but now just want to be released from any further relationship and to be released from any punishment. This is negative forgiveness and is where the journey to reconciling stops unless there is a desire for positive forgiveness.

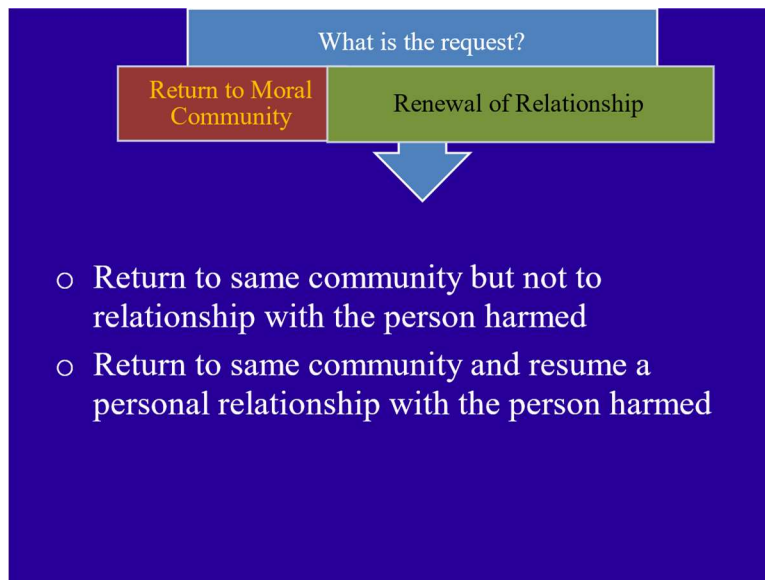


Positive forgiveness reopens the future to ongoing mutuality and reciprocity. It recognizes the need for each party to take responsibility for what each has contributed and then to begin looking at the future by working to put things right.

Positive forgiveness looks back and looks forward.

We need a forgiveness that doesn't keep us bound to the past nor destined to repeat it. We need to "Re-member and Change."

Now that there is an expression to continue the relationship, what exactly is the offender requesting? Does the person just want to return to moral community? You do your thing over there, and I will do my thing over here. I'm okay; your okay.



We will each contribute to this community, but we aren't going to do it together any longer.

The way this looks in the faith community is for me to sit on this side of the sanctuary, and you sit on the other. We will continue to help the church, use our gifts in the church, but won't work much together, at least if we can help it.

When we see them in the store, we just wave and smile so all the onlookers who know we go to the same church, won't get the hint

that we don't like each other all that much.

What moves us beyond the moral community - the I'm okay, you're okay, stay out of the way, mentality - is when we truly seek the renewal of the relationship. That will get us to the lowest branches of the forgiveness tree yet there are still very significant questions.

Is the person just wanting to resume the relationship? To pick up where it was before? The language used for this goes something like this, "I just want things to be like they were before." "I want things to be like it never happened." And the person who was harmed may be saying, "Things can never be like they were before."

This signifies a return to the level of justice and equity that existed prior to the injury. This is

What is the Intent?	
Resume the relationship	Recreate/Renegotiate Relationship

- Return to same community and resume a personal relationship with the person harmed
  - If the oppression is unchallenged, the seeds are germinating for future conflict
  - The relationship may still be toxic
  - "I want things to be like they were"
  - "No matter what, things will have to be different."  
"I can't go back to the way it was."
- Recreate/Renegotiate the relationship

where "Forgive and Forget" can be harmful. It can foster a denial that things weren't that bad before, let it go, and just be like we were before.

Although trust, friendship, or covenant may be deepened and clarified by the incident, it may leave issues of injustice or dysfunction unrecognized and allowed to continue. The relationship may still be toxic.

To not address issues of injustice or dysfunction means that the relationship retakes the shape and

form that set up the possibility of injury in the first place. It doesn't give evidence of growth or signs that persons are maturing and functioning at higher levels of relational health.

What is needed in this final step is not "Forgive and Forget" but to "Re-member and Change."

If both parties are willing, the relationship may be renegotiated or recreated. There can be a transformation that challenges and moves beyond the status quo and results in a higher level of functioning. It requires both parties to take responsibility.

This is very hard work, and we often need the help of our friends and family and at times counselors and pastors. I hope that seeing Augsburg's description of the journey from forgiveness to a recreated relationship will help free anyone who feels they are stuck partway down the tree. It requires both parties to be willing to move from one step to the next and we can get stuck at any of these levels if the other person isn't willing to move to the next branch. God asks us to forgive, but reconciliation takes both persons working together.

How far down the forgiveness tree did Jacob and Esau get to?

After their embrace, Esau offers his men to accompany Jacob and his family to Seir, Esau's home. Jacob seems resistant. He says they have small, tired children and will go too slow so please go on ahead. Jacob perhaps has no intent of living in Seir and knows that if he accepts the help of Esau, he will feel obligated to stay and receive his hospitality. So, Jacob moves on toward Canaan.

Clearly there was some level of reconciliation and at the same time, the tension between these twins never quite goes away and the reciprocity essential to a deeper relationship doesn't seem to ever develop. They made a return to moral community on the forgiveness tree but there doesn't seem to be a recreated relationship.



If nothing else, the family narratives of Genesis, Jacob and Esau and then Joseph and his brothers help us see how complex it is to Re-member and Change.

May you find some solace in knowing the difficulty of forgiveness and reconciliation is real and is part of the human experience. People hurt people. I hurt people. You hurt people. We all are in need of forgiveness.

Hannah Arendt, a German political theorist, said that,  
“Without the grace of embrace, human life in our world, in which evil is inescapably committed but our deeds are irreversible, would be impossible.”

Forgiveness allows God’s Kingdom to come. Without forgiveness, we would be destined to repeated brokenness without an ability to heal.

It is impossible to change what has happened in the past but with a willingness to engage in the work of forgiveness and to seek a renegotiated relationship, we can “Re-Member” the pieces together in a way that takes us beyond the status quo of “Forgive and Forget” to real change that will help us write a better story. A story that is not bound by the past nor destined to repeat it, but one that will “Re-member and Change.”

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Augsberger Model from *Helping People Forgive*, 1996. **David W. Augsburger** was the Professor of Pastoral Counseling at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He is the author of twenty books in pastoral counseling, marriage, and conflict and human relations, including *Pastoral Counseling across Cultures* and *Helping People Forgive*.