

Forgiveness: The Last Step

By Marie M. Fortune

Forgiveness is a pastoral resource available to those who have been victimized by other's actions; it is a means of restoration to wholeness. It should be viewed from the experience of the victim and understood as only one aspect of the healing process.

Because of the obligation to forgive which is taught in Christian formation, persons who are the victims of family violence often feel that they must forgive their offender immediately. This obligation is communicated through pastors, family, and friends. For the victim, however, there is beyond the obligation a desire to forgive that is related to the hope that forgiveness will bring healing and resolution to the pain of the experience.

To Forgive and Forget

For many victims or survivors of family violence, the longing or obligation to forgive is superseded by the subjective sense of not feeling forgiving. The guidance they are receiving from family members, friends, their pastor, and their church points in the direction of "forgive and forget". Even though they may speak the words of forgiveness, they cannot forget; they know very well that popular piety and platitudes are not enough; they know that nothing has changed for them.

Forgiveness is the last step in a process of healing from the brokenness of family violence. Prior steps are necessary in order for a victim of violence and abuse to be *freed to forgive*. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus describes part of the process very concretely:

Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you several times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, "I repent," you must forgive him. (Luke 17:3-4, RSV)

The scripture clearly points to the need for preliminaries to be accomplished before forgiveness is considered. These prerequisites are best described as elements of justice. Once justice has been accomplished, even in a limited way, forgiveness becomes a viable opportunity. Prior to justice, forgiveness is an empty exercise.

From the offender's perspective, forgiveness is often viewed as an immediate way to be relieved of guilt for wrongful actions. An offender may approach a pastor seeking forgiveness or may ask the victim to forgive. Usually these requests are accompanied by genuine remorse and

promises of changed behavior: “I’m sorry, honey; I’ll never hit you again.” Or the offender may bargain with the victim: “If you forgive me and take me back, then I’ll go into treatment.” But forgiveness by the victim or by the church is inappropriate and premature in these situations. Forgiveness before justice is “cheap grace” and cannot contribute to authentic healing and restoration to wholeness for the victim or for the offender. It cuts the healing process short and may well perpetuate the cycle of abuse. It also undercuts the redemption of abusers by preventing them from being accountable for their abusive behavior.

Justice as Precondition

Making justice begins with acknowledgement that harm has been done to one person by another. In Luke’s Gospel, this is referred to as “rebuking,” or confronting, the offender. Pastorally, the offender’s act of confession is the beginning of acknowledgement. To be confronted (whether by family member, pastor, or district attorney) is to be called to accountability for unjust acts. To confess is to acknowledge responsibility for harm done.

Second, repentance is needed. Remorse may be easily forthcoming, but repentance is harder; repentance is derived from *metanoia*, or fundamental change. The prophet Ezekiel called for repentance:

*Repent and turn from all your transgressions...and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!
...so turn, and live! (Ezek. 18:30-32, RSV)*

But change from a pattern of abuse in the family is not accomplished through good intentions; it requires time, hard work, and therapy. Involvement in a treatment process may be the most useful penance that could be prescribed for an abuser.

Another aspect of “justice-making” is restitution. It is the responsibility of the abuser to provide materially for the restoration of those harmed. Thus, paying expenses such as medical treatment, housing, and therapy that a victim incurs as a result of the abuse is a very concrete and symbolic act of justice. Some adult incest survivors have sought and won restitution from their offenders in civil court. Restitution acknowledges the real cost to the victim and represents an effort to make right what was broken.

Each step is dependent on the willingness of the offender to participate in the healing process, but often the offender is unwilling or unavailable.

Providing Elements for Justice and Forgiveness

Justice, forgiveness, and healing for the victim cannot be dependent on the offender. These steps then become the responsibility of the wider community. The church, the legal system, and

family and friends can also make justice for victims. It is the task of helping professionals to provide the elements necessary for justice. These include the following:

1. *Truth-telling/acknowledgement of the harm done to the victim.* In expressing this acknowledgement to the victim, belief and outrage are fully communicated.
2. *Deprivatization/breaking the silence.* Dealing with the offense openly breaks down the secrecy that has sustained the abuse for so long. The silence only protects offenders from the consequences of their acts; it does not protect the victim or future victims. (But care should be taken to respect the privacy of the victims and their choices as to the public discussion of the experience.)
3. *Deminimization/hearing the whole story.* Many people tend to minimize the seriousness of family violence. It is one way of dealing with the horror of its truth. Deminimizing—being willing to hear and believe the experiences of victims—is a means to standing with the victim.
4. *Protection of the vulnerable.* Regardless of what action is taken by the courts or by the offender, the responsibility remains to protect any others who might be at risk.

Thus, when an incest offender is not remorseful or repentant, the survivor needs justice from other sources. Victims need to have their experience acknowledged by others within some wider context, and they need to know that others will help keep the children away from the offender. If a victim chooses to bring civil suit for damages, the choice should be supported and not discouraged.

When a batterer is not remorseful or repentant, the victim needs support for her decision to leave that relationship and try to make it on her own. If she chooses to file criminal charges, she needs support, not someone trying to talk her out of this action. She needs safe shelter rather than someone trying to get her to return to the abuser.

What is Forgiveness?

For the victim, forgiveness is letting go of the immediacy of the trauma, the memory of which continues to terrorize the victim and limit possibilities. The memory is the lens through which the world is viewed. Forgiving involves putting that lens aside but keeping it close at hand. It is the choice to no longer allow the memory of the abuse to continue to abuse. But this step of healing must be carried out according to the victim's timetable. For the incest survivor who is now thirty to forty years old, but is just now remembering the incestuous abuse, the traumatic events may be long past but the memory fresh and painful. Healing will take time.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. Victims never forget experiences of abuse in families. Consciously or unconsciously, the memory remains. Trying to forget is a waste of valuable energy. Putting the memory into perspective so that it no longer dominates one's life is more useful.

Forgiving does not necessarily mean automatically trusting or returning to the offender. Trust that has been so savagely broken can be regained only over time, if at all. The return to a relationship is entirely dependent on trust: can the survivor genuinely trust this person not to abuse her again? The choice to forgive should not be tied to these decisions.

Pastoral Encounters and Treatment Suggestions

From a pastoral perspective, the temptation to skew the justice and forgiveness process is great because the road to healing and restoration is long and arduous. But shortcuts never serve the victim, the offender, or the wider community.

The first pastoral encounter with a situation of family violence may well be with the offender who is arrested or who comes to the pastor expressing remorse and asking for forgiveness. One incest offender approached his pastor and told him that he had been molesting his daughter for two years: Could God forgive him and could the pastor forgive him? The pastor assured him that God forgives those who repent of their sin, and then he offered to pray with him. He also said that as soon as they were finished praying, he (the pastor) wanted the father to call the Child Protection Service and report himself. The man was surprised; but he did as he was instructed. Then the pastor explained to the man that he would eventually be placed in a treatment program for incest offenders and the pastor wanted him to attend that program once a week. He also wanted to see him once a week for Bible study and prayer, and he wanted him in church every Sunday.

The pastor could easily have said a prayer over this man and sent him home. The offender would have felt absolved of any responsibility and, although genuinely desiring at that moment not to repeat the offense, would be highly likely to do so. Instead, the minister used the authority of his pastoral office to give guidance and direction to the offender, which he knew would be in the offender's best interest in the long run. (Reporting any suspicion of any form of child abuse is required of most helping professionals in every state. In some states, clergy are exempt from this requirement.)

Conversion

Another fairly common circumstance a pastor will encounter is the offender's religious conversion. This is particularly common when arrest has already taken place. A pastor would be well advised to approach this situation with caution.

An experience of religious conversion may well be genuine, but should not then be used as a reason to avoid the consequences of the offense: “Judge, I’ve found Jesus Christ; I’m a new man, and I promise you this will never happen again.” If it is a genuine experience, this conversion becomes an invaluable resource to the offender who faces incarceration and possibly months of treatment. The pastor’s task is to help guide and direct this religious resource in order to support the offender’s process of repentance. If it is not a genuine experience, the pastor is virtually the only person who has the authority to call the offender’s bluff. It is the pastor’s responsibility not to allow the offender to manipulate and distort the process in order to avoid negative consequences.

Mediation

Another temptation for the pastor is the resource of mediation. Mediation is the process now widely available (often through church channels) for conflict resolution. It is sometimes recommended as a resource to families dealing with violence and abuse. Mediation is not an appropriate resource with which to address a situation of violence for the following three reasons:

1. Mediation seeks to resolve a conflict between two parties as a way of stopping the abuse. Since the abuse is not the result of a conflict or disagreement, but is a chronic pattern of abusive behavior by the offender, mediation is not appropriate.
2. Mediation is used primarily as an alternative to the criminal justice system. Avoidance of the criminal justice system is usually unwise in addressing family violence. There may be some legitimate reasons why a victim or offender would seek to avoid this system, such as the unequal treatment often given to people of racial or social differences. But it is more likely to be white, middle-class families that seek to avoid this system. It is important that the criminal justice system be used if at all possible because it unequivocally communicates that the offender is held accountable for the abuse and it has the best chance of directing the offender to treatment.
3. Mediation presupposes that two equal parties come to the table to resolve a conflict. Victims of abuse in families can never come to that situation and feel safe from, much less equal to, their abuser.

Mediation may be a valuable resource to call upon *after* the violence and abuse have stopped and family members need to resolve the division of property, custody, and other such problems. But it should not be used as an intervention to stop the violence.

Conclusion

For the Christian, it is finally the power of the Holy Spirit that enables the healing process to take place. This spiritual power gives the victim the strength to forgive, to let go. It gives the victimizer the strength to repent, to change. It gives the church the strength to help both persons in the justice-making process. But the power of the Holy Spirit is released only when justice is made manifest for the victim and offender. Whenever there is an attempt to cut the process short and jump to premature reconciliation, the possibility of authentic healing is lost.

A group of incest offenders in a treatment program made a powerful plea: "Don't forgive so easily." All were Christians and had gone to their pastors as soon as they were arrested, asking to be forgiven. Each had been prayed over, forgiven, and sent home. They said that this pastoral response had been the least helpful to them because it enabled them to continue to avoid accountability for their offenses. Withholding forgiveness and absolution from an offender until certain conditions have been met may be the best way to facilitate a permanent change. Waiting patiently with the victims until they are ready to forgive may be the most charitable and compassionate act the church can offer. In these ways, we take seriously the power of forgiveness to bring people to healing.