

The Second Sunday in Lent

February 25, 2024

An Ever-Flowing River of Grace

Lisa Senuta

*For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake, and
for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*

—Mark 8:35

I am writing this in the Rocky Mountains where the rivers are full and flowing powerfully down the mountains, pooling into lakes and ponds before rushing on down into valleys. They are an icon of the interior life. Jesus seemed to understand that forgiveness is a constant invitation to join an ever-flowing river of mercy and grace.

When I was young, I was taught that forgiveness was needed whenever I misbehaved, crossed a line, broke a rule or divine code. To my immature mind, it seemed like forgiveness was more of a transaction. Now I understand that forgiveness is a perpetual invitation to trust the sufficient provision for our bodies and souls in God's abiding love for all creation. An invitation to spiritually come alive. Yet, a perpetual invitation that we refuse again and again.

These few lines from David Whyte wake me up to a larger sense of what forgiveness is every time I encounter them.

*Enough. These few words are enough, if not these words,
this breath. If not this breath, this sitting here. This
opening to the life we have refused again and again until
now, until now.*

Even though it is what we most deeply long for, our endless need for forgiveness is our perpetual refusal to enter into the eternal flow of the river of God's grace and mercy.

I recently saw this longing on display in a live recording of Leonard Cohen singing *Anthem*. In the video you can sense the whole crowd's



Monday, February 26, 2024

Forgiveness and Letting Go

Maybe losing our life is letting go of the life we think we should or ought to have and accept life as it is right here, as it is right now.

—Lisa Senuta

In an earlier reflection (Friday, February 16), we wrote that observing Lent often involves both giving something up and taking something on. As we continue our focus on taking on and expanding the practice of forgiveness in our lives, we soon learn that this also requires us to give up some of the things that might be blocking our capacity to forgive.

This week our theme is “Forgiveness and Letting Go.” We will focus on what we may need to let go of in order to more fully join in what Lisa Senuta described yesterday as Jesus’ “constant invitation to join an ever-flowing river of mercy and grace.”

Together we will explore over the next week that in order to practice forgiveness we will have to let go of control, resentment, perfectionism, and self-righteousness, to name a few of the barriers to practicing forgiveness.

Change is always hard because it always involves letting go. There is an old joke about a person saying “I really want to grow but I don’t really want to change.” Growth is always a dance of both taking on and letting go.

Perhaps this is what Jesus means by “If you lose your life, you will find it.”

Making it Personal: What is your initial thought about the connection between forgiveness and letting go? As we begin our focus on this theme, do you already have an idea of what God might be calling you to let go of? If so, naming that now and asking for God’s help with letting go may be helpful.

Tuesday, February 27, 2024

When to Let Go of Anger and Resentment

*Holding on to anger and resentment is like drinking
poison and expecting the other person to die.*

—original source unknown

Feelings of anger and resentment are appropriate responses to being hurt, especially by someone we thought we could trust. When our hurt is fresh, these feelings need to be fully experienced and expressed. Doing so is an essential part of healing.

On the other hand, holding on to anger and resentment for too long can impair our healing. The question is: what constitutes “too long?” A month, a year, ten years, a lifetime? Each of us has to discern the answer for ourselves. When we are unsure, seeking the wise counsel of a clergy person, therapist, or friend is always helpful.

Our experience is that we usually know when we are hurting ourselves by not being willing to let go of a past hurt. Please notice, we said a “past hurt” because underlying almost all anger is hurt, and so part of our healing and letting go is acknowledging the hurt we have experienced.

We are learning that forgiveness is a choice that we can make without having to involve the person who has hurt us. Knowing when it is time to make the choice to let go of anger and resentment and move toward forgiveness is a crucial step in enhancing our own emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being.

Making it Personal: Can you think of a time when you benefited from letting go of anger? Are aware of any anger or resentment that you sense you might be holding on to right now? If you need to reach out to someone to help you with your anger, do you know to whom you would turn?



Wednesday, February 28, 2024

Contemplative Practice: Receive & Release

To stand at the edge of the sea, to sense the ebb and flow of the tides, is to have knowledge of things that are as nearly eternal as any earthly life can be.

—Rachel Carson

Those who enjoy spending time by the ocean have experienced the eternal rhythm of the waves washing up on the sand or rocks, retreating, then returning. This ebb and flow, of being received and then released, is closely related both to the theme this week of forgiveness and letting go, and to the contemplative practice we invite you to try this week: *Receive and Release*.*

Related to this practice is a short exercise that can remind us how it feels to hold on to unforgiveness, and how it feels to allow ourselves to choose to let go of wounds, recent and old. Make a fist, with either or both hands, and clench them as hard as you can for fifteen seconds. Then, gradually open your hands and release your clenched fists. What differences do you notice in your body and the overall way you feel between these two gestures? We find that opening the hands not only releases tension, it allows us to be more relaxed and receptive, which opens our hearts and minds to the blessings we receive when we choose to surrender rather than to continue to cling. We simply cannot be open to others, or to God, with a clenched fist.

As we continue to practice, it becomes easier to let go of pain and hurt and let God's healing love and blessing flow through us into the world.

Making it Personal: Can you think of a time when you struggled to let go of a hurt or disappointment? If yes, what are you being invited to let go of during this season of Lent? If you tried the *Receive & Release* practice, what words came to you as you inhaled and exhaled?

*For more on this practice, see p. 85.

Thursday, February 29, 2024

Letting Go of Trying to Change Others

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the people
I cannot change, the courage to change the one
I can, and the wisdom to know ... it's me.*

—adapted version of the Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr

This modified version of the well-known Serenity Prayer can be our guide as we seek to let go of our need to try and control or change others.

Another way to say this is that the only person we can ever change in a relationship is ourselves. Applying this to forgiveness, we sometimes make the mistake of thinking that until we can get someone else to change, we cannot forgive them. This kind of thinking then leads us to try to change that person, something that we simply don't have the power to do.

When we make forgiving another conditional on them first changing, we give them the power to affect our emotional and spiritual well-being. When we instead choose to focus on changing our own hearts and doing the hard and courageous work of practicing forgiveness, we discover that we have the ability to change and heal ourselves independently from what someone else does or doesn't do.

Making it Personal: What part of the adapted version of the Serenity Prayer most speaks to you? Looking back, can you think of a time you now regret when you worked too hard to try to change someone else? Is there someone you have been waiting on to change before you forgive them, and if so, might you begin to think differently about that now?



Friday, March 1, 2024

Letting Go and Letting Come

*The walls we build around us to keep
sadness out also keep out the joy.*

—Jim Rohn

Sometimes, we are afraid to let go of our anger and resentment toward someone who has hurt us because we believe that our anger somehow protects us. “I will never forgive this person as long as I live” may initially be a helpful and necessary self-protective strategy. Over time though, as Jim Rohn expresses above, it is possible that our self-protective anger could block the possibility of healing.

Most of us have experienced a time when we felt intense anger toward someone who hurt us. Hopefully, we also have had the experience of being able to gradually release those feelings so that our hearts could soften, which then allowed us to experience healing. Healing that would not have been possible if we had chosen to cling to our anger. The healing we experienced may have only been for ourselves, or it may have included healing and reconciliation with the person who hurt us. Either way, it is worth keeping in mind that healing can only occur after we are willing to release our anger and resentment.

While we have been reflecting on letting go this week, it is also important to reflect on letting come. Healing and joy can only begin to come when we are willing to make room for them by doing the vulnerable work of letting go.

Making it Personal: What is your response to the quote from Jim Rohn and how might it apply to the process of forgiveness? What connections do you see, or have you seen, in your life between the choice to let go, and being able to make room for healing and new life to begin?

Saturday, March 2, 2024

Listening to the Whispers

Jesus invites us to release our defensive and reactive self and join God's peace with the cracks at the center of our being.

—Lisa Senuta

This week we focused on the connection between letting go and our practice of forgiveness. The quote from Lisa Senuta's reflection from this past Sunday is a helpful summary of what we have explored this week: "Jesus invites us to release our defensive and reactive self and join God's peace with the cracks at the center of our being."

We learned that our defensive and reactive self sometimes gets in the way of our ability to practice forgiveness. We learned that letting go of our pride, resentment, and desire to change others is an integral part of our ability to forgive.

As we do each Saturday, we close our week by pausing to listen to the whispers of what God has revealed to us this week. While the quotes and writings offered in this devotional are important, even more important is your willingness to pay attention to the whispers from God. Nudges from within you are hearing as you engage with the material and focus more deeply on your own journey of forgiveness.

Making it Personal: Looking back on the readings on letting go and forgiveness, as well as revisiting any notes you have written, was there a nudge or whisper from the Spirit for you? If so, is what you are sensing a source of comfort or a source of challenge, or both? Is there something you have done or some action that you want to take regarding letting go and forgiveness?
