

# *The Third Sunday in Lent*

March 3, 2024

## **Finding Grace in Forgiveness**

Westina Matthews

*Forgiveness is a heartache and difficult to achieve because strangely, it not only refuses to eliminate the original wound, but actually draws us closer to its source.*

—David Whyte

I learned that he was seriously ill and not expected to live much longer. I had not been in contact with him in over 25 years. He was a former boyfriend, and the best I can say about the relationship is that it ended badly. I mean like really badly. Like I should have sent him a case of dog food as a farewell gift.

After our not-so-graceful break up, it took me a couple of years before I finally was able to forgive him. But apparently, having heard this latest news, I had not forgotten after all. In learning of his illness, I began to remember again. I rediscovered that there was still lingering resentment. A root of bitterness emerged. How is it that, after these many years later, my heart is still hardened in this spot toward this man that I had supposedly forgiven?

Where was my forgiveness? Where was my compassion?

On June 17, 2015, nine African Americans were killed during a Bible study at a church in Charleston, South Carolina. In court, families of the victims offered the gunman forgiveness and said they were praying for his soul, even as they described the pain of their loss. Following the tragic Amish school shooting of ten young schoolgirls in a one-room Amish school in October 2006, Amish neighbors visited the killer's family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain.

I wonder, are the families of those victims like me? Are they too on a life-long journey of forgiving past hurts? A journey measured

## THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

not in its completion, but in its movement, sometimes forward, sometimes stalled, but always accompanied by the One who knows the way.

I fully realize that in ending that relationship of years ago, there was neither a murder nor any terror. Perhaps there was a hurt pride, a broken heart, a deep disgust. But, thank God, I survived, I healed, and I moved on. Yet, the beginning of a weed has been found growing in my soul that needs to be lovingly pulled out before it spreads, with a “thank you Jesus” and (quoting Beyoncé) “you turned out to be the best thing I never had!”

And so, what I can do right now is to pray. I can pray for a peaceful journey ... both for him and for me. I can pray that I will be able to reimagine a relationship to this old, thought-to-have-been-forgotten past hurt. I can pray with a grateful heart for the renewed awareness of this past hurt, welcoming it as a reminder of the loving presence of God as my path to healing.

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Monday, March 4, 2024

## Forgiveness as a Choice

*I can pray with a grateful heart for the renewed awareness of this past hurt, welcoming it as a reminder of the loving presence of God as my path to healing.*

—Westina Matthews

**W**ith vulnerability and self-compassion, Westina Matthews wrote yesterday about a recent experience in which she had to choose once again to practice forgiveness with someone who had hurt her 25 years previously. Who among us hasn't had the experience of thinking we have forgiven someone and healed the hurt they caused, only to have it reawakened by something that occurs in the present?

Westina reminds us that forgiveness is a choice. She also reminds us that sometimes it is a choice that we have to make more than once when we realize that a long-ago hurt is still affecting us.

Earlier we wrote that forgiveness, like love, is not primarily a feeling, but rather an act of the will—a choice or a decision that we can make to free ourselves from the injury we either have experienced or caused. When it comes to forgiving another person, as in the story Westina shared, it is something we can do on our own. The act of forgiving is not dependent on the participation of the person who hurt us.

This week our focus will turn to more fully understanding how forgiveness is a choice, and why we would want to make this sometimes very difficult decision.

**Making it Personal:** What thoughts do you have about “forgiveness as a choice”? Can you think of a time when you thought you had chosen to forgive someone only to find the old hurt coming back? If so, were you able to choose to forgive again?

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Tuesday, March 5, 2024

## A Definition of Forgiveness

*Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*

—Colossians 3:13

Robert Enright is one of the leading researchers on forgiveness, and is the founder of the International Forgiveness Institute. He is also the author of, *Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*. On the website of the Institute he offers the following definition of forgiveness:

*When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by denying our right to the resentment, but instead by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence, and love; as we give these, we as forgivers realize that the offender does not necessarily have a right to such gifts.*

In this definition, we clearly see that forgiveness is a choice. When a person chooses to let go of their right to be resentful, they can begin the process of forgiveness. This is a choice because it involves making a conscious decision to deny the “right to the resentment.”

The definition goes on to say that to offer compassion and love to someone who has offended us is to offer that person a gift. And, as with any gift, forgiveness is always a choice. It is always a gift we can choose to give, or choose to withhold.

**Making it Personal:** Reread Robert Enright’s definition of forgiveness. What stands out for you? Does this definition connect with your own experience? Do you think it is missing anything?

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Wednesday, March 6, 2024

## Contemplative Practice: Wonder Walk

*Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.*

—Ephesians 5:1-2 (*The Message* translation)

As we continue to explore the theme this week, we invite you to try the practice of taking a *Wonder Walk*.<sup>\*</sup> This contemplative way of walking connects beautifully with the theme this week of choosing to forgive. Perhaps we might choose to take a challenging relationship or decision with us as we walk to—as Ephesians tell us above—keep company with God, to listen and learn how to embody God's extravagant way of loving the world.

It doesn't matter where we walk: in nature, in our homes, a city center, or simply in our imaginations. This practice will support and strengthen our decision and commitment to open our entire being to God—not in denial or sublimation of hurts or disappointments, but with a faith in the deeper mystery and promise of God's infinite love and compassion. When we are able to choose to forgive, we will reap spiritual fruit, a rich harvest that will provide emotional and spiritual sustenance.

May we engage with this practice, not from a feeling that we need to change, but from a desire to love others and to be forgiving, as God has been so loving and forgiving toward us. May we walk and wonder in the eternal, whole-hearted love of God.

**Making it Personal:** If you took a Wonder Walk, were there any surprises, new awareness, or insights that came up? Did you notice anything shift in your mind and heart related to the idea that we can choose to forgive?

*\*For more on this practice, see p. 84.*

Thursday, March 7, 2024

## Why Forgive?

*(Part 1)*

*At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?” Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.”*

—Matthew 18:21-22 (*The Message* translation)

If forgiveness is a choice, then it follows that at some point we will ask, “Why make the choice to practice forgiveness?” The reflections for both today and tomorrow will respond to this question, exploring two different motivations for choosing to forgive.

As people of faith, our first response to this question is that our faith teaches us to do so. Jesus offers numerous teachings on forgiveness, including the one above from the Gospel of Matthew. The message here could not be any clearer: when it comes to forgiveness, there is no keeping score; we are to offer forgiveness without ceasing.

Jesus’ teachings about forgiveness flow directly from his radical teachings about love, where he calls us not only to love those who love us, but especially to love our enemies, to love those we find extremely challenging to love. Extending this to forgiveness, Jesus calls us to forgive, even when it’s difficult, even when we don’t necessarily feel like it.

Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness also calls us to honest examination, like when he asks, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3). Sometimes it is our own resistance to letting go of resentment that becomes a log in our eye, which blocks our ability to see that forgiveness is a choice. Jesus goes on to ask us to remove the log in our own eyes so that we can more clearly see the way of love that is the way of Jesus.

**Making it Personal:** How strongly does your faith guide your choice to practice forgiveness? Have you ever made a hard choice to forgive, not because you felt like it, but because you felt called to do so by your faith? Do you see a connection between the scripture that speaks of the log in our own eyes and choosing to forgive?



Friday, March 8, 2024

## Why Forgive? (Part 2)

*It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.*

—attributed to The Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Yesterday we explored one answer to the question, “Why make the choice to practice forgiveness?”: because our faith calls us to do so. Today we focus on a second reason: practicing forgiveness is good for our well-being.

According to the Mayo Clinic website, a world renowned academic medical center, the many benefits of practicing forgiveness include:

- Healthier relationships
- Improved mental health
- Less anxiety, stress, and hostility
- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- A stronger immune system
- Improved heart health
- Improved self-esteem

This is quite an extensive list that points directly to how practicing forgiveness is not just a gift we give to the person we forgive, but is also a gift we give to ourselves.

**Making it Personal:** How did you respond to the quote from St. Francis? What do you think about the benefits of practicing forgiveness from the Mayo Clinic? Think and/or write about a time when you experienced any of these benefits after you let go of resentment and forgave someone or forgave yourself.

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Saturday, March 9, 2024

## Listening to the Whispers

*Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.*

—Corrie ten Boom

**W**e take time once again on Saturday to listen to the whispers of what we have learned this past week about forgiveness, and specifically about our theme for this week, that forgiveness is a choice.

One of the cornerstones of being a person of faith, as we wrote in our February 23 reflection, is living a life that bears the fruits of Jesus' teachings. Two of the most important fruits of living with our faith as our compass are love and forgiveness. Thinking of love and forgiveness as fruits is helpful because it reminds us that it takes time and intention to grow these fruits. Just as one does not plant an apple tree seed and harvest apples immediately, it also takes time to see the seeds of love and forgiveness blossom.

We are now halfway through Lent and we at Living Compass pray that your Lenten journey is bearing the fruit that both you and God desire. We hope that you have experienced insights and growth in multiple areas of wellness—spiritual, emotional, physical, and relational. Rest assured that there is still plenty of time left in Lent, and ample opportunity for us to grow in our understanding and practice of forgiveness.

**Making it Personal:** As you look back on the past week, are there any particular thoughts, insights, or experiences you want to be sure to note? At any point this week did you find yourself being invited out of your comfort zone? If so, how are you responding to that discomfort?

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