

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 17, 2024

Walking into Forgiveness— A Journey or a Destination?

Anna Noon

“Solvitur ambulando”—“It is solved by walking.”

—St. Augustine of Hippo

Walking time for me, in addition to being good exercise, is good thinking and praying time. There’s something about the rhythm and pace of walking that can break free the log jams of my mind and lift my spirit when it is troubled. In the summer of 2021, after the borders opened up for international flights, and vaccinations made it possible to move out of Covid isolation, I made my way to St. Jean Pied de Port in the French Pyrenees to begin a walking pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

Any pilgrim who has walked the Camino carrying a backpack is well acquainted with the weight of things. The weight of things on my mind and in my heart were just as heavy if not heavier than the pack on my back. I know that with time and distance on a journey comes perspective, provided that the time and terrain traveled is accompanied with attention and prayerful intention. I didn’t know when I set out if anything would be solved by the time I reached my destination, but I knew I needed release from the grief and hurt and loss that were magnified by being stuck inside.

Bringing only that which serves you on your journey and letting go of that which does not is essential when walking a Camino. Unpacking my bag of belongings nightly and re-packing in the morning before returning to the journey of putting one foot in front of the other; taking time to pray and sort out what hurts and needs healing; being open for new encounters, and offering gratitude for whatever is received were good practice for re-calibrating life back home.



Monday, March 18, 2024

Forgiving Family and Friends

*Choosing to forgive, to release someone or something,
to truly decide to let go and walk on, frees us to reach
the true destination, the peace that passes beyond
our human understanding, our home with God.*

—Anna Noon

This week we will focus on practicing forgiveness with the people with whom we are most closely connected: our family and friends.

Last week, as we focused on forgiving ourselves, it's possible that a regret about someone you have hurt came to mind. If so, it is likely that the person is either a family member or close friend. There is an old saying that "we only hurt the ones we love." Because we experience the deepest love and intimacy with family and close friends, there is also the capacity for the deepest hurt. We know that forgiving ourselves when we have hurt someone we love is important work. Equally important is practicing forgiving those who have hurt us.

The quote from Anna Noon's reflection reflects two of our earlier weekly themes. First, she reminds us that forgiveness is a choice. Even if we have previously chosen not to forgive someone who has hurt us, we are free to make a different choice at any time. Second, she reminds us that when we ground our choice to forgive in our faith, we are able to experience, and even offer, a peace which passes human understanding.

Making it Personal: What is your response to the saying, "we only hurt the ones we love"? Can you think of a time (perhaps right now) that you have struggled to forgive someone close to you? Can you think of a time when you experienced a deep peace after forgiving a family member or friend?

Tuesday, March 19, 2024

The Care and Maintenance of Relationships

*Human relationships are not rocket science—
they are far, far more complicated.*

—James Pennebaker

Few things affect the quality of our lives more than the quality of our relationships. At the same time, relationships are complicated, requiring an ongoing commitment to maintain and strengthen them. As the quote above says, “Human relationships are not rocket science—they are far, far more complicated.”

Longstanding relationships are often especially complicated. One reason is that we co-created patterns in these relationships that, at some point, have become automatic. If these patterns are not healthy or life-giving (for example, we agree to not ever talk about conflict), the relationship will suffer over time.

The hopeful news is we often have more agency to change and improve a relationship than we realize. While this is not always the case, we often can do things, including having difficult conversations, rather than avoiding them, to help shift a relationship stuck in a painful or unhealthy pattern. We may need to ask for professional help to do this, but with commitment and intention, change can happen.

Changing old patterns is challenging. We can see this in the interactions between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. While changing patterns in relationships is challenging and complicated, with compassion (for ourselves and others), patience, and perseverance, it is well within our reach.

Making it Personal: Looking back, can you observe a relationship pattern that you either wished you had changed, or were able to change? Is there a relationship pattern with someone in your life right now that you would like to change?



Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Contemplative Practice: Welcoming Prayer

You have to keep saying to yourself: "I am being loved by an unconditional, unlimited love and that love allows me to be a free person, center of my own actions and decisions." The more you can come to realize this, the more you will be able to forgive those who have hurt you and love them in their brokenness.

—Henri Nouwen

As we wrote yesterday, changing old patterns is challenging and complicated, especially in longstanding relationships. This week, we would like to suggest working with the *Welcoming Prayer Practice**. This practice can be especially helpful when we are struggling with unresolved feelings of hurt we have experienced with a close friend or family member.

When used consistently, this prayer practice has the capacity to quickly and effectively dislodge us from our habitual reactions, emotional patterns, and unhelpful mindsets. Paradoxically, this happens when we allow ourselves to relax, sink in, and be physically present to a particular experience without judging or analyzing—either ourselves or the other person or situation.

We then simply welcome and lightly name whatever is being triggered, such as *pain*, or *anger*, or *disappointment*. When we are able to welcome whatever arises in us—rather than denying or pushing the unpleasantness away—we create an atmosphere of inner hospitality. This counter-intuitive process disarms the trigger and removes its ability to continue to hurt us.

When we are able to welcome, name, and then gently let go, we naturally create conditions for forgiveness to arise from a more grounded and centered space.

Making it Personal: Can you think of a family member or friend you are struggling to forgive? If yes, how might this practice help you find a place within where you can experience whole-hearted forgiveness?

**For more on this practice, see p. 87.*

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

*It takes one person to forgive, it takes
two people to be reunited.*

—Lewis Smedes

We sometimes hear people say, “I am not able to forgive this person because there is no way I am going to let them back into my life.” Such a statement conflates forgiveness and reconciliation, when in reality, the two are separate yet related.

As we have learned, forgiveness is a choice and the person we are forgiving does not need to be involved in that choice. It’s possible the person we are forgiving has died, or is completely out of our lives at this point. Even so, a practice of forgiveness can set us free and begin to heal the pain from the injury we have experienced. When we let go of our resentment, we are free to experience a sense of freedom because the injury no longer takes up psychic and spiritual energy in our lives.

Once we have come to a place of forgiveness, then, and only then, can we decide if we want to take the additional step of reconciliation. This can only be done with the person who has hurt us and will require a sincere desire on their part to also seek forgiveness and reconciliation. It is often wise to seek counsel and support from a third party to help navigate this vulnerable process. We should never feel pressure to reconcile with a person who has hurt us if our instincts are telling us it is not wise to do so, or if we simply are not yet ready. We can give ourselves permission to choose forgiveness without reconciliation.

Making it Personal: Have you previously made the choice to forgive, but to not reconcile with a person who hurt you? If so, what did you learn from that? Are you wrestling with the choice between forgiveness and reconciliation right now with someone? Would seeking counsel help you with your decision and process?



Friday, March 22, 2024

The Power of Words

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. ... From the same mouth can come blessing and cursing.

—James 3:5-6,10

This passage uses the image of a forest fire to demonstrate the power that our words have on one another. How accurate it is that the words we speak to one another can provide blessing and nourishment to others, just as a small fire in the wilderness can help cook our food, or provide warmth and comfort on a chilly evening. James also reminds us that the words we speak to one another can just as quickly destroy and harm. And, like a human-caused forest fire, it does not matter if the hurtful words we use are spoken on purpose, or are spoken because we are being careless. They are destructive either way.

As we continue to reflect on forgiveness with our friends and families, let's take a moment to reflect on what types of fires we may be lighting with our words. Are we lighting fires that cause harm and destruction, or fires that provide nourishment and warmth? Are our words creating a blessing or a curse?

We're all familiar with the saying, "The grass is greener on the other side of the fence." We'd like to offer a different version: "The grass is greener where we water it." If we "water" the relationships in our lives with kind and generous words, they will grow in ways that are healthy and life-giving. Our words and our love and blessings are some of the best ways we can water the lives of those closest to us.

Making it Personal: Is there a family member or friend who could use some words of blessing from you right now? What do you think of the idea that "the grass is greener where we water it"? Are there any opportunities for forgiveness presenting themselves in your life right now because of harsh words that have been spoken?

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Listening to the Whispers

It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.

—Irish proverb

If you are like many, you sometimes may take for granted that you are fortunate to have shelter—a home, apartment, or some kind of physical dwelling—a place where you get to live and sleep on a daily basis. Perhaps we're not always as appreciative as we could be that we have such a shelter in our lives. We've also noticed that we often take for granted another type of shelter in which we live every day: the shelter provided by the love of friends and family. It is this kind of shelter to which the beautiful Irish proverb is referring.

This week we have been reflecting on the ways that we can provide love and shelter within our closest relationships. We offer shelter when we practice love, gratitude, patience, acceptance, and forgiveness. We refuse shelter when we withhold these acts of loving kindness toward our family and friends. Many know, all too well, that sometimes within our families we have neither received, nor provided, a loving shelter.

The reflections for this week may have stirred up some old hurt because it is not uncommon to have unresolved pain within our families and closest relationships. If this is true for you, know that you are not alone. Be kind to yourself, and if you need the personal or professional support of others, please ask for it. Forgiveness and healing are always possible, even if the opportunity for reconciliation is not.

Making it Personal: What have you experienced and learned this week about forgiveness within families? Knowing that the whispers of the Spirit can sometimes be disquieting at first, how are you responding to what is coming up for you? Is there anything you want to do differently going forward regarding practicing forgiveness with your family and other close relationships?
