

3 advent

André Malraux, the French novelist, described a country priest who had heard confessions for many decades, and summed up what he had learned about human nature in two statements: "First of all, people are much more unhappy than one thinks ... and second, there is no such thing as a grown-up person."

These two observations are very closely related, if not one and the same: People who have not grown up cannot cultivate their souls and spirits, and, therefore, remain chronically susceptible to unhappiness.

The happiness that we all yearn for is a sentiment commonly associated with the lost paradise of our childhood -- when we felt omnipotent, entitled and immortal.

Happiness in adulthood, however, requires realism, reciprocity and coming to terms with our mortality. It is cultivation of forgiveness, tolerance, patience, generosity and compassion.

--T. Byram Kyrasu, *The Art of Serenity: The Path to a Joyful Life in the Best and Worst of Times* (Simon & Schuster, 2003), x.

Why do we forgive? Samuel Wells provides six reasons. The six of these, taken together, render irrelevant any system of justice based on a hierarchy of sins.

- 1) "Because we don't want to turn into creatures of bitterness locked up in the past ... [letting] those who've hurt us continue to dominate our lives."
- 2) "Because ... we know we're sinners too, and we can't withhold from others the forgiveness we so desperately need for ourselves."
- 3) "Because Jesus in his cross and resurrection has released the most powerful energy in the universe, and we want to be part of it and be filled with it."
- 4) "Because we know that all the forms of justice, all the systems for setting things straight, have failed."
- 5) "Because Jesus is dying for us to forgive."
- 6) "Because forgiveness is the justice of God."

--Samuel Wells, "Forgiving Ahab: Naboth's vineyard and God's justice," *The Christian Century*, April 11, 2013. This essay is adapted from Wells' book, *Learning to Dream Again: Rediscovering the Heart of God* (Eerdmans, 2013).

But perhaps you do need me to tell you that a number of years ago I had a very painful experience in ministry. I was the pastor of a small and struggling congregation on the edge of a not very glamorous English city. A few short years earlier the diocese had erected a new church building on a housing project where few people had ever been churchgoers. It was a surprising, remarkable, perhaps an unbelievable thing to do. Sadly many local people didn't take well to the new building, and a number of local children took to smashing the windows and even, on occasion, throwing stones at the church members as they left after worship services. Three years after I came to the church things were a little more stable, some of the programs of the church were growing rapidly, and we began to believe we maybe, just possibly, could do unbelievable things. We used some left over money from the building fund to install two stained glass windows on the first floor of the very same building where not four years previously every single window had been broken several times. It felt like Jeremiah buying a field at Anathoth. We were saying, one day all the people of this place will find in this church a blessing, and all the fear and antagonism will be gone. Everyone thought the stained glass windows idea was crazy. It was an unbelievable thing to do. But then some things started to go wrong and one or two of the programs of the church started to unravel and what had been a gathering joy started to feel like a nightmare of human frailty. And I didn't know what to do. So I did what Anglican priests are trained to do – I went to see my bishop.

And my bishop listened gently as I told him the story. And finally he said, "What was the worst thing about it all for you?" And I said, "D'you know what, I think maybe for the first time in my life, I'd dared to dream." And I wept, there in his study. And the reason for my telling you this story is what he then said. He looked at me tenderly and said "You're going to need time – but you need to learn to dream again." I've never forgotten those words. "You need to learn to dream again."

from http://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/sermons/Sept30LearningtoDreamAgain_000.pdf

What do I do after I'm forgiven
....better yet, who am I after I accept it?

Today's gospel feels like an attack on my sinfulness. Using soldiers and tax collectors, John cuts to the heart of my problem—I am still a sinful person. While I try to be good, I still fail. I fall short of the best that God wants from me. I am convicted in my lack of action, and my wrong action. The collect even reinforces this: "...because we are sorely hindered by our sins..." That's how it feels.

All that stands in sharp contrast to the lesson from Zephaniah which shouts with rejoicing. Written during the time when King Josiah was leading Israel back from devastating slavery under the Assyrians, this passage is more about the spring after a long winter of rejection, solitude and shame. In acknowledgement of their desire to become more righteous and fall on the mercy of God, they have been released from the tyranny. "I will remove disaster from you..."

Reading these lessons together has made me wonder about the nature of who and how we are after forgiveness. Forgiveness is a powerful gift, and those who shared our Lenten series gained some good insights about how our souls—our very being—can change as a result of *asking* forgiveness. Equally important is the question of what happens when we *accept* forgiveness.

We all know how it feels to have a broken relationship. When we have been betrayed by actions or words from someone we love deeply, or when our sense of security has been broken by someone acting violently toward us, we change. We are caught off guard. We are emotionally stung. It hurts. A level of inherent trust in the world has been shattered. We can't look at the world through the same 'rose-colored' lenses we did before.

But when the one who hurt us says, "I'm sorry; please forgive me," how do we react? I wonder if we struggle to accept forgiveness because we look first to those places where we are inadequate. But it is also about feeling proud that we have a hurt to carry around—to show as a scar that we have lived. So, both asking forgiveness and accepting forgiveness is about acknowledging weakness and the need for others.

As hard as it may be to accept forgiveness, it is the only way to reconcile the hurt we feel. If we have the ability to really step back and accept the apology—even from ourselves, where do we go next? How do we begin the dance again?

Samuel Wells, Anglican priest and former chaplain at Duke University talks about forgiveness in his book, *Learning to Dream Again: Rediscovering the Heart of God*. He recalls a time when he had begun to work in a mission established in a neighborhood where few people attended church. In a few short years, people began to respond to their outreach programs. But, there was a setback. A few people began to throw rocks and break out the windows in their building. He was devastated. In a conversation with his bishop, he breaks down from frustration, to which the bishop says, what is that about.

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We all have places we are broken. We have all been hurt by another. Unless we want to be defined the rest of our lives as someone who has been hurt, it is essential that we learn to dream again. We have to dream that we will be able to be close to another person who has hurt us, or we have to dream that we can be close to God who loves us unconditionally. Dreams can start small. They can be images of single days or single encounters—the point is to start.

I believe God is encouraged when we heal the rifts in between humans. God is hopeful that as we realize the power of healing ragged bonds between humans we will gather some insight into the power of receiving his gracious gift of redemption. Redemption, after all, is forgiveness of hurts—ones we have caused, and ones we have received. Redemption is about starting over, accepting that the course of life can be different. It is about living interdependently—giving and receiving to each other and God. We have to absorb this lesson before we are ready to receive Jesus.