

Genesis 45: 3-11, 15  
Psalm 37: 1-11, 39-40  
I Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-50  
Luke 6: 27-38

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Year C

## AMAZING GRACE

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to you  
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN.

Forgiveness continually reminds me that Jesus is divine, and I am not. When Jesus is asked by Peter if it is enough to forgive someone who sins against him seven times, Jesus says no, 70. Hearing that, a voice always wells up inside me that says, "Easy for you to say."

As C.S.Lewis wrote in Mere Christianity, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive."

Forgiveness is work. Perhaps the hardest spiritual work any of us ever do. Neither Jesus, nor or popular culture make it easy.

In the immediate aftermath of the Columbine shootings, I remember a cable news reporter asking a parent whose child had been murdered, "Do you think you'll ever be able to forgive the shooter?"

It's a dreadful example of how forgiveness has become the task of the victim or survivor, a box to be checked on the path to healing. Trauma survivors have enormous burdens in managing their emotional and physical survival. Asking someone to even contemplate forgiveness in that moment only reinforces the belief that forgiveness is a blanket pardon that means what happened doesn't matter anymore or was somehow okay.

That oversimplification of forgiveness strips it of its sacredness and liberating power.

Imagining forgiveness as pilgrimage might be more helpful-- a long road to travel with God, or in search of God, much like the Camino to Santiago, uncertain, unpredictable, promising only that you will not be who you were by the time you arrive.

Forgiveness is something I've thought a lot about recently. A year ago – almost to the day—I was verbally and cruelly attack by a friend of more than fifty years for becoming a priest.

It happened to be on my birthday. After throwing back two martinis the conversation turned to politics and she said someone couldn't be a moral leader because they were religious.

That's when I found myself defending Mitt Romney, someone with whom I disagree on almost everything. But I said of course he could be a moral leader. And that's she launched into me with words I won't repeat.

I appreciate that her alcoholism is a disease, and yet?

What am to do when she asks if I will forgive her “bad attitude” towards religion without every acknowledging the pain she caused me?

I reached out and said I'd be willing to meet and talk about what happened. I'd listen to why she hated religion and she, to how I'd been hurt....steps towards forgiveness.... But that was rejected. It's become about her, how she misses me and the person who was “more cosmopolitan” before I went to seminary, whatever that means.

For me it means that for now, we've gone as far as we can go. Papering over our differences and going on as if nothing happened guarantees that resentment will grow.

Waiting for a perpetrator to say “I'm sorry, what I did was wrong,” is as the writer Anne Lamott said, “like taking rat poison and waiting for someone else to die.”

We give them power over us when we wait for them to act and apologize in a way they never will.

In taking back our power, we liberate ourselves from the oppressor. That's what I believe Jesus is calling us to do in forgiving wildly and abundantly. It is claiming the liberating power of God's love.

Whether it is loving our enemies, blessing those who curse us, turning our cheeks, or giving a stranger the shirt, as well as the coat off our backs, we are called to do more, love more, and above all resist in "rendering evil for evil." All of which seem daunting, verging on impossible and circles back to the work of forgiveness.

Writes Debie Thomas in this week's "Journey with Jesus.:

...forgiveness isn't an escalator, it's a spiral staircase, We circle, circle, and circle again, trying to create distance between the pain we've suffered and the new life we seek. Sometimes we can't tell if we've ascended at all; we keep seeing same broken landscape below us. But ever so slowly, our perspective changes. Ever so slowly, the ground of our pain falls away. Ever so slowly we rise.

A moment of revelation – deep, spiritual revelation— came when I was asked to reflect in a Good Friday service on Christ's words, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Those words had always increased the distance between Jesus and me. How could anyone who was being tortured to death, ask for forgiveness for his torturers? What I missed completely until a mentor pointed it out to me, was that Jesus asked God to forgive his torturers. He didn't say in that moment that he did.

That changed everything.

I realized that when I can't, or don't want to forgive, I can lift it up to God. I can pray not to be fixated on my hatred. I can pray to have my heart more opened to what a spirit of forgiveness might mean. I start where I am, do what I can, and realize I'm engaged in a process, not throwing a switch.

Madeline L'Engle, the author and a lifelong Episcopalian, once said for her sometimes forgiveness means "the ability to think of someone without malice" which is how I now think of my friend.

But there are moments when forgiveness may come as the most amazing grace. I helped care for my mother during the last nine months of her life. We had, at times, a rocky relationship. I had hoped that we might reconcile some of our differences and put to rest the anger we both felt over the years towards each other. But that never completely happened.

The mistake I made was in thinking forgiveness would come in words. Words we would say. How else could it come? I once said to her that if there were things I had done over the years I was sorry and asked for her forgiveness and she changed the subject. That, I thought was that. Doesn't everything have to be talked through? It does not.

In the final months before she died, my mother could no longer recognize any of her children. I'd drive out to the assisted living facility a few times a week. When I fed her dinner – watching food dribble out of her mouth as she stared at me blankly—I thought of how that was what she had done for me when I was a baby.

And then, through an unexpected set of circumstances, I was at the facility the night she died. She took her final breaths in my arms.

When I realized that her arms were the first to hold me as I came into this world, and mine were the last to hold her she left, forgiveness washed over me like the balm of love.

Never has grace been more amazing. I once was blind but now I see: forgiveness is when we finally can truly feel like God's beloved children.

How we travel the path from the crosses that crucify us is our choice. But the love to be found in forgiveness is God's promise to us.

AMEN