

Volf is careful to say that he is not advocating the adage forgive and forget (which is as feeble as it is dismissive). Rather, he says it's a decision we make not to keep the memory operative and active[9]. Not that we forget, but when we catch ourselves running that memory loop, we consciously press the "stop" button.

The Washington Post Magazine published a story entitled, **The Truth About Forgiveness**[10]. It was the cover story. The article featured a Baltimore man, Bernard Williams, whose 17-year old son was shot and killed by a neighbor in the early 90s. Williams buried his son, the neighbor went to prison, and Williams was left with grief and a lot of anger. To deal with both, he self-medicated, getting hooked on drugs. His family suffered enough that he decided to get sober, but he was still left with anger toward the man who'd killed his son. He said he'd see the man's face in his mind's eye. He entertained fantasies of killing him. After more than a dozen years of remembering and rehearsing the events of the night his son was killed, Bernard decided to seek help. He chose an organization that promotes reconciliation, because he knew that unless he could forgive the man who killed his son, he might as well be dead, too. That was how stuck he was in his memories of how he and his son had been wronged.

For Bernard Williams, his decision to stop rehearsing the wrongs done to him helped make room for God's Spirit of Forgiveness.

While remembering past hurts hinders forgiveness, there is another kind of remembering that furthers it. And that is remembering God's abiding love. When we are struggling to forgive, we would do well to remember that God loves us. No matter how another has rejected or hurt us, the greater truth of our lives is that God loves us. By remembering God's love, we can step away from the victim role.

In remembering God's love, we might also recall the occasions God has forgiven us. In fact, if we look back, we may be able to see how God has taken mistakes we've made and helped us incorporate them into our path. If God has redeemed some of the garbage heaps we've created, then who are we to say that someone else should be excluded from the forgiveness that we ourselves have received[11]?

Being in touch with God's love may also help us let go of our desire for the other person to apologize or admit wrong. If we're certain of God's love, then we're no longer dependent on the other giving anything in return. We can let go of outcomes, in other words. We might have a relationship in the future with the person who hurt us, or we may never have one, who knows? Either way, we can let go of our need to control the relationship. (Which is what we do as long as we withhold our forgiveness.) That

path is predictable. Praying God's forgiveness will flow through us, on the other hand, blazes a path that is unpredictable. Who knows what will change or heal inside of us? Who knows how the person who hurt us will react [12]?

Now there is an Easter message. God's forgiveness creates possibilities. God's forgiveness opens doors previously closed, rolls stones away from tombs.

Maybe the sins you are retaining - or the grudge that you are holding - is the lid to your own tomb. Maybe you are the one holding it closed. You don't have to be Houdini and find your own way out. Just start by letting go. And stop trying so hard! Breathe deeply the breath of Christ and the forgiveness which Christ has already offered. Amen, and peace be with you.

[1] Miroslav Volf's recorded conversation with Krista Tippett at The Washington National Cathedral, March 11, 2004.

[2] Ibid.

[3] William Countryman, *Forgiving & Forgiven*, 1998.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Volf's conversation with Krista Tippett.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Russell's Hoban's *A Bargain for Frances*, 1957.

[9] Volf's conversation with Krista Tippett.

[10] Cover Story, *Washington Post Magazine*, March 22, 2009.

[11] Countryman, *Forgiving and Forgiven*.

[12] Volf's conversation with Krista Tippett.

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Forgiveness



From a sermon offered April 8, 2018 by Reverend Andrea Martin, Pastor of Holy Faith Church. The sermon provided comment on the Bible passage of the day (printed below).

"When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked ... Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." -- The Gospel According to John Chapter 20, verses 19-23.



In her sermon, Pastor Andrea began:

"Today, I would like to speak about forgiveness. Forgiveness, you know, is a difficult thing. I make my Easter confession to you: I can struggle mightily to forgive. I have a long memory and am capable of nursing a grudge. Holding a grudge is not something I like to do. Nursing a grudge upsets my stomach and disrupts my sleep. I wonder if anyone here can relate."

The word that we take to mean “forgive” comes from a Greek word that’s better rendered “to let go,” as in “to let go” of a grudge.

If ever a person had a right to hold a grudge, it was Jesus. He had a right to hold a grudge not just against those who sent him to the cross but against his so-called friends who’d stood by and let it happen. Not one of his disciples spoke up or came to his defense. In fact, it would seem the only person to publicly question the charges against Jesus was Pontius Pilate. But what about all the people Jesus had healed? Or fed? Where were they? And the 12? It was one of the 12 who got him arrested in the first place -- Judas, the Defector. But the remaining 11? Well, they defected, too.

So Jesus was entitled to hard feelings. Entitled, as well, to seeking justice. It’s no wonder the disciples barricade themselves behind locked doors when they first hear that Mary has seen the Lord! Jesus has a right to extract justice from those who let him down. And perhaps when he first appears to the disciples, that’s what they’re expecting him to do.

Jesus certainly doesn’t choose his entrance the way we might were we making a gentle visit. There’s no knocking on the door or announcing himself. No, instead, Jesus appears like a thief in the night. Gruesome marks of crucifixion and all. A few of the disciples probably had to pick themselves up off the floor.

But instead of meting out revenge -- or at the very least, some barbed accusations -- Jesus says to them, “Peace. Peace be with you.”

If the cowering disciples are bracing for retribution, then Jesus’ words must indeed effect peace (and great relief).

Miroslav Volf - a theologian from the former Yugoslavia - knows a thing or two about large-scale retribution having lived through the Bosnian War of the 1990s. Since immigrating to the United States, he’s made it his life’s work to teach and preach forgiveness.

Volf agrees that forgiveness is about letting go. Specifically, he says that forgiveness is about letting go of one’s right to justice.[1]

So when Jesus considers the disciples’ betrayal, he doesn’t pretend it didn’t happen. He doesn’t say their betrayal didn’t hurt him or that it was no big deal. He never pretends that what they did was anything but unjust. He has a right to see justice done. But he lets go of that right.

And instead of saying to the disciples, “Gotcha,” Jesus says: “Peace.”

Now here’s where I must admit that when I have been wronged, the idea of letting go of my right to justice is a notion that sticks in my craw.

A while back - in a radio interview he gave about forgiveness - Volf told of a woman who’d fled Cuba. This woman often said that she didn’t want any part of heaven if Castro was going to be there, too.[2]

Each of us could probably switch out Castro’s name and put in someone else’s -- someone we’d be really miffed

to see in heaven along with dear old grandma. Miffed because where would the justice be for us who worked hard to do what was right and live by the Golden Rule?

And this is how God’s forgiveness galls, because God’s copious forgiveness shines a light on the ugliness of our self-righteous indignation. God’s willingness to let go of grudges exposes our own unwillingness.[3] And we know deep down that our sense of moral superiority builds walls between us and others.[4] So we have to get over ourselves, and that’s easier said than done. In fact, maybe we cannot do it. Only God can do it - can help us let go of the fact that we’ve been wronged.

For most, this represents a change of perspective. Instead of forgiveness being one more ought or should placed upon us, consider that forgiveness does not come from us at all, but originates in God. It’s not about finding it in our hearts to forgive; it’s more about participating in the forgiveness that God already offers the person who hurt us or did us wrong[5]. In this way, forgiveness is more a posture -- a ready willingness -- to board a train that’s already moving. Forgiveness is a gift we receive, not something we muster the strength to do.

In other words, if we’ve been working hard to forgive to no avail, maybe the first thing we do is to stop working so hard!! After all, God has already forgiven the person; we just let go and pray that God one day brings us on board.

In this way, some of my own hard feelings toward someone who hurt me deeply have softened. For a long time, I held a grudge. I’d tried and tried to forgive and felt guilty that I could not.

A kind spiritual director advised me to let go of trying. Instead, the ability to forgive was a gift I might pray to receive. But in the meantime, I could stop trying so hard to change my feelings toward this person. Although I didn’t hold out much hope for my ability to one day forgive, I was too tired to spend more energy of my own.

One morning - months after this conversation - I awoke from a dream. Though the story line was foggy, the dream left me feeling for this person something resembling, dare I say, affection. I felt empathy that no amount of willpower on my part could have produced. I can only attribute the softening of my heart to a gift of God’s Spirit.

Relying on God’s initiative to forgive does not mean, of course, that we can’t cooperate a little. After all, there are a lot of obstacles we can erect that would block the action of the Spirit in our lives. Volf writes about the



role our memories play in forgiveness. So for, example, someone slights us. Maybe by ignoring or excluding us, or by saying something hurtful. We might play and replay the incident in our minds.

Neurobiologists tell us this that by rehearsing an incident over and over, we change the very anatomy of our brains. We pave and re-pave the neuronal pathways that create the memory so that what was a dirt road for our thoughts become an expressway.

At first, remembering a hurt is a protective measure[7]. Anyone read the 1957 children’s classic, *A Bargain for Frances*? It’s about two badgers who are best friends and play together every day. That is until one of them, Thelma, plays a mean trick on Frances. The book ends with Frances’ mother telling her, “Remember, whenever you play with Thelma, you have to be careful[8].”

At first, our remembering that we have to be careful when we’re with someone prevents us from getting hurt. Like touching a hot burner, it makes us remove ourselves from the situation. And let me be clear – being Christian does not mean accepting hurt and injury.

But once the situation has changed - once we are out of harm’s way - playing the memory over and over no longer serves a purpose. Instead, it keeps us from letting go and moving forward.



Dr. Miroslav Volf