

MOVING FROM A CULTURE OF REVENGE TO A CULTURE OF FORGIVENESS

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In recent times much has been written about the need to live as a forgiven and forgiving people. It provides an opportunity to address the violence and revenge that is rampant in our communities, our nation and our world. The broad goal of forgiveness is to restore broken relationships with God, with one another, with ourselves and all of creation. It is a wonderful gift that we give ourselves and each other, that brings healing to body, mind and spirit. It helps us identify and release the anger and hatred that wants revenge and allows God to enter and help with the healing.

Over the years I have listened to many people that are held hostage from grudges in their past and from a lack of forgiveness. It can be found in the lives of individuals, families, communities and also between races and cultures, groups and nations.

Forgiveness does not mean taking the coward's way out, or condoning the evil or excusing the wrongdoing, or taking away the responsibility for justice to be done. Neither does it make one forget the injury experienced. It is remembering and making a conscious decision to forgive the offender. Forgiveness is not an "over and done with" happening. It is a process, a journey into letting go of the hurt on the way to healing and wholeness and hope. The process cannot be rushed or glossed over. The person experiencing the hurt must walk through it.

Most religions consider forgiveness an important part of their belief system. In recent times we have seen the wonderful example of the Amish community choosing to forgive the murderer of their children and reaching out to assist families of both victims and perpetrators. One of the Amish leaders said, "The acid of hatred destroys the container."

Former Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold said: "Forgiveness may be the only credible option to address the continuing escalation of violence." We see in Jesus, the supreme example of forgiveness as he hung on the cross dying and praying for his murderers. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing." When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive

those who trespass against us.” Forgiveness is central to the life of a believer.

How does one forgive?

- First of all, it is a decision we make, a choice of the heart, the opposite of an “eye for an eye” approach. This calls us to let go of negative judgments, resentment and desire for revenge and to replace them with thoughts of peace and reconciliation. Name the hurt you feel and need to let go of.
- Draw on spiritual resources to move toward forgiveness. And move to a higher moral ground than that of the one who has injured you. Forgiveness is a spiritual gift that we need to pray for.
- We also need to reclaim a sense of our own value in order to forgive. It will give us a foundation to work through the process of forgiving. Often our sense of wounded pride or lack of getting our own way may get in the way of forgiveness.
- Think about God’s generous forgiveness of us and give thanks. This will help us make a practice of forgiveness in our daily living.
- Make note of the value of forgiveness in our own wellbeing , in our community, in our world.
- Realize we can do nothing about what has happened in the past. Think of the experience as a way to build a better future and to help others.
- We can only offer forgiveness. We cannot control how the other offending person or group will respond.

I recall a wonderful story of forgiveness. Bud Welch is the father of a young woman killed in the Oklahoma City bombing. At first he was very angry and decided to do something about it. His hurt and anger prevented him from living a full life. He still felt the great loss of his daughter. He decided to visit the home and father of the one who did the killing . Bud discovered that this family got no sympathy, was isolated and suffering greatly from the crime committed and the isolation, hatred and blame they experienced. He also decided to spend his future years speaking out against the death penalty. This brought him great relief from his own hurt and brought new life not only to himself but to the world bent on revenge.

As people of faith, we must strive to create a better and safer future for all people and for generations still to come. On a personal level, we will have

little peace or wellbeing until we allow the gift of a forgiving heart to govern our daily living.

We can ask ourselves what role does forgiveness play in breaking the cycle of violence in our homes, our families, our communities, our nation and world. We need to model and teach forgiveness as a way of life in our homes, schools and neighborhoods so that children will learn a different way to live. We also need to challenge responses that are full of revenge, in government, in local communities and wherever we find it.

Where have you seen forgiveness at work that produced positive and healing results?

The search for healing and forgiveness can only be accomplished by the grace of God.

May that grace fill our minds and hearts and wills and lead us to true forgiveness.