



SPIRIT IN THE DESERT

Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSVUE)

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven¹⁴ times.

²³ “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live, move and have our being.

There is an old proverb that says to return hate for love is fiendish, to return love for love is human, and to return love for hate is divine.

The root of the verb forgiveness is “letting go.” I’m thinking that forgiveness falls under the category of the divine because to forgive would mean letting go of resentment, justice, payback, and the need to believe someone must recognize my suffering.

Psychiatrist Gerald May describes holding a grudge as drinking poison and hoping the other person dies.

Forgiveness is so hard it isn't even included in the fruit of the Spirit!

The Spirit alone produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I cannot force the fruit of the Spirit into being. They arise from the fecundity of a life rooted in intimate communal love with God. A choice to forgive is to empty the occupied space reserved for love.

The fruit of the Spirit we present reflects our willingness to nurture our inner capacity for love's flow in and out. Doesn't exactly make we want to look in the mirror! I may see the fruit of unforgiveness; resentment, revenge, desire for justice, payback, and the desire for others to feel pain for what they did.

Is it so bad to want someone to see and acknowledge my pain?

I just had a discussion with a group of guys in recovery who attend AA faithfully. They were talking about the experience of going beyond the fourth step of the twelve steps. The energy in the room rose as they talked about the euphoria they experienced as they completed steps four through ten.

Those steps involve making a fearless moral inventory of ourselves, admitting them to God and another, then saying (aloud!) the exact nature of our wrongs and making amends to all those we have harmed.

Who in this life has ever been expected to do such a deep dive into the yukky nooks and crannies of our shadow self? It would take real courage and/or desperation to want to eliminate being enslaved by an addiction.

The twelfth step begins with "having had a spiritual awakening..." There is a reason why the twelfth and final step assume a spiritual awakening has occurred after genuine completion of the eleventh step. It is the releasing of space occupied with unforgiveness.

Sidebar: I just realized I am tangling the act of forgiving and unforgiveness. I thought about untangling, but I can't! Both originate from the radical grace of God. Forgiving releases another, receiving forgiveness connects us to God's radical grace. Both the capacity to forgive and ask forgiveness are gifts from God that nurture and release our capacity for love's flow.

The public may not be comfortable identifying with the language of addiction due to the stereotype it carries. But defining addiction as a category of people is just another way of dividing people between us and them.

In the same way, I have seen people in the AA program who believe they've cornered the market on the term addiction. They call others who have never had a substance abuse normies. This too contributes to the division between us and them.

I have often quoted Brennan Manning who says there is only one thing that divides us. It is between those who are awake and those who are not awake.

I understand why those in recovery see a world of us and them. It is because the non-recovery world doesn't recognize their own need for recovery. To non-identified addicts, addiction is considered a problem for "them" not "us." For those in recovery it is about us not them. The average person's addictions bring them seemingly harmless pleasures, public favor, prestigious positions and lots of stuff. Why rock the boat? For the substance abused the addiction brings them to their knees.

The average person misses out on taking a moral inventory of their own lives. But they also miss out on the spiritual awakening. When a person lets go of resentment, they experience what Gerald May calls the "vital spiritual release that protects our capacity to love."

No wonder Jesus said that we must forgive seventy times seven times. It is literally for our own good!

In truth, from an eternal perspective, the only one with ultimate authority to condemn or forgive a person is God. You nor I have the authority to forgive or condemn. Our declaration of forgiveness to someone else carries no ultimate judgment from God.

So, I conclude that forgiveness is primarily for the person who is doing the forgiving. To let go of what has occupied our space and blocked our capacity to give and receive love and allowing ultimate judgment to be in the hands of God.

Yes, forgiveness could be the most difficult thing we could ever do, but the most freeing. Because forgiveness is a surrender to radical grace for ourself first, and then to another as the parable said.

I guess you could say forgiveness is a fruit of God. Forgiveness is God's area as the only authority to forgive or condemn. For us to forgive or "let go" is to participate in God's divine nature. To remain unwilling to forgive is understandable as the pain lingers. But as we take our own moral inventory, we realize our unwillingness to forgive is simply a life of willfulness, not a life of freedom.

To let go of our grip on the past is to with open hands and heart, fall wearily into the arms of God and breathe in the divine present.

Amen