

Reflection on Forgiveness: “A New Heart”
Rev. Martha Hodges **Sept. 27, 2009**

A heart that is inured to its own shallowness, indifference, and selfishness, is a heart that does not feel. It is a heart that so fears the pain of regret and true repentance that it cannot change. It cannot renew itself. It is a heart that cannot forgive; that cannot ask for forgiveness.

We often hear that it is more important to forgive than to be forgiven. To carry a grudge is to carry the anger and hurt that are the source of our suffering – to keep those feelings alive in us. We hear that to free ourselves for a future of peace and to grow in spirit, we must learn to release our bitterness.

Research supports this, showing that people who forgive are happier and less likely to suffer from stress and physical ailments.

I believe all this is true, but forgiveness is so much easier said than done. How is it supposed to happen when you're still hurt and angry about a perceived wrong? You can't just decide you're going to forgive.... At least, I can't. And should every wrong be forgiven? Should you be expected to forgive the adult who abused you as a child? The death camp guard who brutalized your parent? The spouse who used you, manipulated you, bullied or humiliated you?

Of course, it's easy to say you're sorry. And it may surprise you to hear that I think the empty apology is not without some value. I believe it's better to observe the rituals of civility, to say the words “I'm sorry,” even if you don't mean them, than to say nothing at all. Saying the words reminds us that we live in covenant with one another; that there are rules of behavior that we honor in the abstract, even if we dishonor them in our actions. Of course, while the fake apology may help to preserve the social compact, it does little for the spiritual well-being of either the wronged or the wrong-doer.

So if we crave the healing of true reconciliation, we will not be comforted or appeased by a superficial apology. But forgiveness is not about the apology. In fact, the health of our souls may depend even more on our ability to forgive those who do not or cannot apologize – those who feel no remorse, or cannot seek forgiveness because they are dead or no longer in our lives.

But how can we achieve such forgiveness when we are feeling not at all forgiving? It depends on what we mean by forgiveness. We can seek understanding, and even compassion. We can acknowledge that we are all, to one degree or another, the walking wounded. We are all the products of our own neuroses and limitations, our own hurts and betrayals. The abuser was probably an abused child. The brutal prison guard is a weak person who has fallen prey to his own fears and need to associate with the powerful, or grew up in an environment that did not practice or teach compassion or empathy. The cruel spouse did not learn about loving and mutually respectful relationships from the example of his parents' marriage.

But is understanding the same as forgiveness? On an abstract level, I believe it is. Compassion for the one who has wronged us is inspired by the understanding that we are all more similar than otherwise. That, if we had experienced the same upbringing, inherited the same traits, and experienced the same environmental influences and conditions, our behavior would most likely be no different... no better. Compassion calls us to understand that our attacker is a suffering creature, an individual in pain. Empathy tells us that we are connected to the sinner as well as to the saint. That we are linked to them in our common humanity. That we are part of an interdependent web of being.

But we are not obliged to reconcile with the abuser, the tyrant, the sadist. We are not required by forgiveness to reform them or save them or even spend time in the same room with them. We need not feel we have failed in our compassion if we choose to avoid them.

Much like love, to which it is closely related, forgiveness is easier to claim in the abstract than it is to practice in our daily lives. It is sometimes easier to "love" someone for his humanity than it is to like them. It can be easier to forgive someone as a fellow flawed human being than it is to reach reconciliation, that is, to dwell in peaceful relationship with them.

And if we are the one seeking forgiveness? Strangely, it is easier to ask for forgiveness than to grant it. There are steps to follow: Confession and remorse; apology and acceptance of the other's anger, hurt, resentment. Resolving not to repeat the offence. And making reparation, as much as possible. Once we have undergone this process in all sincerity, we can forgive ourselves for our bad action. While we seek reconciliation with the one we have wronged, even if the object of our wrongdoing rejects our attempts, we have performed a healing act. We have healed our hurting souls, and we have done a bit to heal a hurting world. We have had a change of heart, we have earned a new heart.