

Hope: God is in the Details of Forgiveness

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It is great to be back at Saint John's again. I will never forget our organizational meeting for the Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute in the summer of 1993. We were challenged by a vision and energized by this community that gave us hope.

As I thought about what I would share from my heart to yours, I remembered my college years when I sold Bibles in Charlestown, South Carolina, to make my fortune! I bought a \$10.00 bicycle and peddled my way throughout the city that memorable summer of 1971. And I met every kind of person you can imagine all day and all week long. I also found a pet. As I was preparing to leave each morning for the day's surprises, a mixed-breed dog greeted me with a wagging tail. And he followed me around all day. Sometimes when I stopped at a restaurant for breakfast, this Heinz 57 would curl up beside my bike and just wait for me, and then keep me company as I went along. At some point he would just disappear until the next morning, to repeat this daily ritual of loyalty throughout the summer without exception. I was lonely, and some days I would have done better staying in bed; I needed a friend.

I decided to befriend that little dog who had been so faithful. One morning I got off my bike, whistled for the dog, and patted my leg in a friendly manner; and the dog wagged his tail, tucked it up underneath his legs, and sidwinded up to me timidly and cautiously. And when he got within arm's reach for me to pet him on the head, he would suddenly back way off, and then start the process all over again. The amazing thing is that as much as we were together throughout the entire summer, I cannot remember a single time when the dog allowed me to actually pet him.

This morning I am thinking of that little dog again. It represents a part of me that was sexually abused by a clergy person in a church. What is profound about clergy sexual abuse, and what often happens to those of us who have

been abused, is that like the little dog, we find ourselves following God from a distance throughout the corridors of the Church, wanting to be touched, wanting to be close to God in our spir-itual journey, but too afraid of getting hurt again. Many who have been sexually abused by clergy, from that day to this, have really never trusted God or Church, and cannot risk being touched even by a caring person reaching out.

Many of us who have been sexually abused by clergy are plagued by lingering anxiety and mistrust that pushes us away from our spiritual legacy rooted in the traditions of our faith. Sacred symbols are contaminated by our experience and memory of abuse.

Let me share this part from my life. For example, in the Church I grew up in, a fundamentalist tradition, we have a beautiful ritual of healing that uses a sacred healing oil, the very same oil from the very same bottle that the pastor used to sexually molest me. How could I participate in the healing ritual that was transformed into a horrifying symbol of abuse? Even today this holy oil peppers my memories not of healing but of violation, not of comfort but of terror, not of spiritual solace but of ministerial manipulation.

And like the little dog following from a safe distance, there are many who have been violated by clergy who can follow only from a very safe distance, desperately wanting to be touched, needing to be healed through the power of sacred ritual, but who cannot participate, cannot get beyond the barriers of being violated, and can wander without hope in the lost important details of God's love.

We recall, however, the compassion of Jesus as narrated in the Christian Testament, especially in his attention to those who yearn from afar, those who are distant and castoffs. Jesus cared about the abandoned and forgotten, the needy of body and spirit. He fed the hungry; he healed the sick; he welcomed the outcasts; he forgave the sinners.

Whenever the Church in any way minimizes, denies, or deflects the responsibility for abusive behavior, the victims are pushed away, squeezed out, and denied the love and community they seek. The victims are denied hope. But the details where God is found are imbedded in forgiveness.

I believe that when I choose to forgive, I refuse to let any other person, any other place, any other circumstance dictate to me how I am going to act. When I choose forgiveness, I decide that I am not going to give the keys to any place, person, or circumstance that might restrain my spirit. I am reminded of the

story of a former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp who was visiting with a friend who had participated and shared that same experience in that same cell. And he asked his friend: "Have you forgiven the Nazis?" And his friend said, "Yes." With furrowed brow the guy said, "I haven't. I am still consumed with hatred for them." Then his friend gently said, "Well, in that case, they still have you imprisoned, don't they?"

And so the challenge for me, as a survivor of clergy sexual abuse, is do I remain in prison waiting for the Church to unlock the door, or do I work through the details of forgiveness and undo the shackles myself? What does it mean to forgive? What does it mean for God to be in the details of forgiveness? Does it mean the elimination of justice? I think not. Some people like to believe that God is the author of second chances.

The potter in the Jewish Testament book of Jeremiah doesn't throw away the clay that has come out misshapen. Rather, it is put back to the wheel and refashioned. So, too, does God choose not to throw away the clay of a perpetrator or of a victim of abuse in the Church but rather chooses to refashion it. Well, if that is true, then what does it mean for someone who has been broken by sexual abuse in the Church? What does it mean for such a person to forgive? What does it mean to forgive the Church, the pastor, the person, anyone?

Well, for sure it doesn't mean to forgive and forget. For myself, I will never forget that, after my brother and I disclosed to Church officials the fact of our having been repeatedly abused by our pastor, a minister went to my dad and demanded he do the Christian thing, and forgive and forget. He was not to hold grudges but rather to confess any and all hatred toward the pastor, God, and whomever else. It was as if this robot-like response, forgive and forget confessional statement, would fix us, heal the fractured community and mend its brokenness.

Actually, the profound pain that the victim is asked to forgive and forget is rooted in the betrayal of trust and trauma of violation within the very community of faith that was thought to be safe. The demand of the Church that my dad forgive and forget added another layer of disaster to the disclosure of our abuse. It might have been less painful to say nothing because of the lack of support, the blame, and the intimidation. My father and mother were ostracized from their friends in the Church and labeled troublemakers. My brother was condemned and accused of defying the pastor by tempting him into an inappropriate sexual relationship, and I escaped because I was away in Bible school learning to be a pastor.

A consequence of a "forgive and forget" mentality is a bond that not only does not resolve the hurt, but rather further reinforces the trauma. Such an attitude would suggest that we need to rescue God and the Church from the colossal screw up of not providing safety in the corridors of the Church and protection from its ministers. Forgiving and forgetting allows officials to breathe a sigh of relief and get God off the hook. Furthermore, such a trap in the hearts of those who have been victimized is a cruel trick of survival, a scissors mentality. That is, I get on with my life by cutting off any and all people who have hurt me. I've been there and done that. It is as if to say the person who abused me doesn't exist, nor does the organization; and the pain will go away. But instead, what I have discovered is that this scissors mentality not only does not cut people who have created pain out of my life, but rather cuts me out of the human family. That's not what forgiveness is about. It's not about a superficial resolution at my expense. It's not about compliance to cover injustice. It's not about being big to get someone off the hook. It's not about unfairness.

Forgiveness is about a process of embracing the pain of abuse and cleaning the wound, even scrubbing it, and cleansing it some more.

I have a friend in the Midwest who called me recently to talk about a horrible accident he had on his motorcycle. He was out cruising on country roads and suddenly hit a stretch of gravel and lost control of his bike. When it was all over he said his back was like hamburger. At the hospital they scrubbed all the dirt from his back and pulled out each of the pebbles imbedded in his skin. He said it hurt so bad that he passed out. It was the most excruciating pain he had ever known. Of course, not to have gone through the procedure would likely have caused even worse damage at even greater health risk. He had to do what was medically right to heal. He couldn't deny himself the process of healing.

As a victim, I too had to dress my wound. I had to embrace my pain. I had to scrub the wound, again and again, and clean it out, not masochistically to create more pain for its own sake, to get credit with God, but to begin with cleansing for the healing process to take its course. Then healing can begin, not because of what I do, but because of who I am. I must recognize that every step along the way to forgiveness is just as important as the end result, and overlooking a step can delay the healing. The details are as critical as they can be deadly, and if not attended to justly they can cause psychological and spiritual infections that prevent healing. And the sooner, the less jarring. The faster, the less permanent. The deeper, the less crippling. Otherwise I am imprisoned by the hurt.

I can fall into a trap of looking for forgiveness as if it were some kind of commodity, or an event, rather than an attitude that I bring to my every situation of brokenness that I feel. I know forgiveness to be an inner quality. It's less an external goal that depends on a lot of often complicated circumstances, and more an inner reality that depends on me. Forgiveness is who I am. If I am forgiveness, then no matter where I go or what I do, that's what I bring to my life situation at any given moment. This is not about some magical, predetermined response to betrayal and hurt, but rather about an attitude of willingness to engage the process of forgiveness.

And part of that process is to acknowledge our pain and allow it to surface with the confidence of healing and restoration. This is how I would understand what the apostle Paul was talking about when he said we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Not destroyed? Why? Because I carry within me the power to do the work of forgiveness. I don't give that power away to anyone. What is the work of forgiveness? It is clarification. Before I can forgive, I must first be able to name and identify the injury to me. I need to clarify the details of the violation imposed on me and assign the responsibility for the abuse to the perpetrator, and not carry the responsibility for my injury as a victim. That's real important, fundamental, and the beginning.

Whenever the Church minimizes or denies or displaces the responsibility of abuse, the message that the victim gets is, because the victim participated, the victim must share the blame, ie, the responsibility. The victim helped the perpetrator. Not to buy into this deflection requires that I, as a victim, have a strong sense of self, of who I am in order to define appropriate boundaries and not be drawn into another person's baggage.

And when the Church system has a history of using its power to deny its guilt or displace its responsibility with more offensive behavior that further violates the victim, it preys on a weak sense of self that undermines a constructive process that can lead to healing through forgiveness.

Let me give you another personal example. When I was six I heard a sermon on a Sunday night of our zealous fundamentalist pastor who was preaching about how he helped a hopeless alcoholic. There were a total of thirteen of us as a family sitting together in a row. I must confess I was sleeping. At a point the pastor mentioned my father, Don, by name and asked him to send one of his boys to the front to help him illustrate a point. And so before I actually

woke up completely I was heading down the aisle to the front of church not knowing for sure why, but when I got to the front I remember the pastor picking me up and standing me on the altar. I was wearing a little clip-on tie and he unclipped it, and he began to unbutton my shirt and he began to unbutton my belt buckle and unzip my pants. And I zipped my pants back up, and he asked what's wrong with me? I am just trying to use you as an illustration. I am trying to tell these people how God works to save those who are utterly lost. I can remember standing there, and everybody was happy praising God, but I was thinking, why am I feeling so embarrassed and awful? Why can't I be happy? I remember being bewildered as I walked back to my dad and sat next to him and later as I told my mom and my dad that I didn't feel good. I remember them saying that it was more about me not being very outgoing. That was the message I got. That I was introverted and shy, and they wished the pastor had picked someone more outgoing to help.

Now, is it any wonder that when my dad, who was taught to submit to the authority of the Church, helped the pastor out, if that's what it took to save souls? Is it any wonder that, when I was fourteen, another pastor from the same church told me that massaging his penis is a way of ministering and giving support to the senior pastor as he attempted to work out the stresses of pastoral life? I felt responsible to do it.

I cannot forgive unless I clarify. I can't clarify unless I have this strong sense of self. In order to forgive, I must have that sense of who I am. I must be willing to embrace my pain and clean the wound in my life. But most of us may be unable in the beginning, or don't like to clean wounds.

Many of us do what I did, and spend much of our lives running from any and all circumstances that threaten to open our wounds or show them for what they are. And we become trapped by bad memories. In my case, I constantly projected them onto other people and situations. My anger and hatred and guilt dominated and controlled me. I was being chased in the woods by a pack of wolves. I was spending my life running from those wolves, running from that anger and hatred and fear. The faster I tried to run away, the closer my emotions moved in on me and began to nip at my heels until I was engulfed by the very issues I was running from.

But rather than trying to control the Church's response to my abuse out there, I now am in charge: facing my own pain inside, little by little and day by day. For a long while I ran from my abuse by being a very hard working and good pastor, and blocking out my history. I hoped that the faithful would see that I was dedicated to God, and they wouldn't notice my resentment, and hatred,

and fear, all accumulating slowly and taking over my life until the wolves finally got me.

In 1989 I was in the proverbial padded cell with a major clinical depression at Columbine Psychiatric Hospital in Littleton, Colorado. I was in a tough spot with myself and my history. My protective resources had run out with no way to shield my pain. My Bible, bloodied from my raw knuckles, the pages of which I had battered from the covers, was turned to Psalm 91. With more hurt than I thought I could bear, I began the painful process of exposing and scrubbing my wounds, and slowly began to create a capacity for forgiveness in me.

In my therapy I created a little story, an analogy, that helped me along the way: Envision yourself walking barefooted on a path through a deep dark woods, expecting to catch up with family and friends for your favorite picnic in a beautiful clearing just over the hill a short distance ahead. All your favorite people and picnic foods will be there. As you move along you begin to hear reassuring familiar voices. You smell the wafting aromas of the picnic table. You look down from on top the hill and see it all less than a football field away. There is the picnic. There your favorite people are having a wonderful time.

You want to be there so badly, but there is a problem. The last 100 yards are covered with red hot coals. Well, you think, I will go through the woods. But I have no shoes and might hurt myself, and I could also lose my way. I have been in these deep, dark woods all my life and I want to get out of them. So what do I do? It seems the only way is to walk through the coals, and so I take that first step. Oh, it burns my feet, and I am in pain and I think I can't go on.

Then God appears to me in the form that is most familiar and assures me that if you will take the first step, I will be there with you. It won't be like the Christian analogy where we have the footsteps on the beach, and there is just one set of footsteps where God carries us over. Surely God does that sometimes, but not in the world of forgiveness and healing.

God's assurance is that if you take the first step, and when the pain gets so great you can't handle it, God will give you strength for the second step, and the next. And each coal that I step on, the coals of abandonment, despair, betrayal, one at a time, allows me to release another story. And I discover, as I cautiously look ahead, that the picnic is coming to me.

I believe that forgiveness demands not just embracing the pain, but also it requires a fair hearing. Victims of sexual abuse need to have their stories

acknowledged and validated. I needed someone, somewhere to affirm that what happened to me really was abuse. And it wasn't my fault. It truly was a disaster. Many times as victim, I would get stuck demanding that people who have wronged me hear, recognize, and accept their responsibility as a condition for decreasing my pain. You have hurt me. Don't you hear it? Don't you see it? I needed my victimizer to hear me as a condition for regaining some sanity. So I held onto the terrible events. I desperately wanted the Church to take responsibility for its abusive environment. I wanted the Church to see how it devastated my life; and when it did not, I was destroyed. I was stuck in my anger and resentment and bitterness and mistrust.

But I began ever so slowly to learn that forgiveness doesn't work that way. I can't be waiting for someone else to give me what only I can give myself, what can only come from the inside. That power to forgive is within me. When I get stuck in the seething and simmering of my hurt, waiting for my Church to finally get it, I preoccupy myself with remembering, and I can't heal. I can't let go. All I can do is be judgmental and express my resentment and relive over and over again and again the old injuries. And that has led to my reenacting my injuries in my relationship with others.

But when I choose to forgive, I choose also to let go of my expectations of who needs to forgive me and how they need to do it and what they need to say. I gradually see that the Church is an institution that will continue to function independent of my opinion of it. I come to the awareness that if I wait for the Church to forgive me as I would like, I may never know the freedom of forgiveness.

So I become determined in my heart to create a safe place to put people in my life who will give me that fair hearing, who will validate my pain, who remind me that it really wasn't my fault, who encourage me to marshal the powers of forgiveness. With that I can let go of every hindrance, and every attachment that would hold me back, and I can borrow the words of Martin Luther King, "thank God almighty, I am free at last!"

In forgiveness I provide for myself a place of fair hearing. And the process of forgiveness demands that I give up my right to judge my perpetrator. It demands that I give up my right to be right. As one person said, forgiveness requires me to give up my idea of better or worse and to see myself as equal and co-runner with those who abuse me. It means letting go of needing to be in the one-up or the one-down position. It even means that I connect with my perpetrator through the link of common brokenness that I share with all.

When I focus on the faults and failings of other people, I'm blinded to the reality of my own present defects and shortcoming that I need in order to forgive. They help me see. They help me focus. They help me put things in perspective. They, rather than my strengths, are a bridge to freedom on which I connect with others. They are our common ground of forgiveness. On the other hand, when I judge, I stay in prison.

A fractured community is never healed by scorekeeping that measures hurt against hurt, but rather by victim and victimizer acknowledging their common brokenness. I can remain stuck as long as I cling to my victimization, unable to accept my power to take charge, and forever shackled by my suffering. I am not free to forgive. Forgiveness is my healing balm.

Let me close with this story about a volunteer who was a professional clown and worked with terminally-ill children and kids in a burn unit. He said his view was pretty simple in the beginning, just to make the kids laugh and give them moments of happiness to distract them from their suffering. Here is fragile humanity. What do you do? I guess you just face it, he writes. When the kids are really hurting so bad, and so afraid, and probably dying, and everybody's heart is breaking, just face it and see what happens after that. See what to do next. He said, I got the idea of walking around with popcorn so when a kid is crying I dab up the tears with the popcorn, pop it into my mouth and into their mouth. And together we just sit there eating the tears. Sometimes we can just eat the tears.

Healing and forgiveness happen when we can bring ourselves together, acknowledge what we can do, and accept what we can't. KW