

Rev. Ali Donohue
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Year A Proper 19

“And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

These are not easy words to digest.

We might actually be inclined to politely ignore them, focusing instead on the Psalm or another reading. But if we remember two fundamental things about God, Jesus' words become more helpful.

The first is that we have a God who loves us extravagantly, who wants what is best for us, wants us to flourish and be loving and fully alive in our lives. And second, in Jesus we have a God who is fully divine and fully human himself, and so he knows fully well what makes human beings tick, what makes us better, what diminishes us and what makes our world smaller.

And when we remember who God we can rest assured that this Gospel story is not of a God issuing out terrible punishments. This is God teaching us about *real life consequences*.

We think it's the God who says, “If you lie to me, you will not get dessert.” But it is actually a God who is saying, “If you lie to me, I will not trust you. If you don't watch where you are going while riding your bike, you will ride into a tree — not because I am going to put a tree there but because that's what happens to everybody! If you roll around in the middle of the trampoline — for instance — your sister is probably going to land on your head.”

If you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart, *it will torment you*. It will eat you up inside. It will rob you of your joy. It will imprison you.

Yesterday the NYTimes ran an interview with the author of a study on family estrangement — the first of its kind in that it studied it scientifically and had subjects and interviews and things like that — it wasn't just a book of human interest stories. This is the kind of topic people didn't used to talk about in polite company because it was considered shameful, or like it reflected poorly on the family. These norms are changing, and he was able to gather a whole lot of people with estrangement in their families.

Analyzing the survey data, he discovered that there were “correlations between being estranged and feeling anxious or depressed or isolated.”

Evidently, there are as many reasons for family estrangements as there are people. But that there was no obvious difference between the stories of people who reconciled and those who didn't.

But for the “vast majority who do, it turned out to be a positive, sometimes even life-changing experience.” They found it to be a major life accomplishment.

And if you want to see how people *really* feel about this topic, settle in with a cup of good coffee and open the reader comments. They are almost more valuable than the article itself because they represent just how challenging and complicated forgiveness really is. How heartbreaking life can be, how wounded we are.

People wanted to know: How do you forgive someone who isn't sorry? Or who keeps doing the thing you're trying to forgive them for? Or who refuses to even agree that something bad happened? How do you heal an estrangement when it is due to abuse, and you don't feel safe

around them? How do you make amends when the person is still a danger?

Readers sounded off on lots of topics, and many argued that when estrangement is the result of mental illness, abuse, alcohol or drug addiction, or personality disorders that reuniting is more fraught. That sometimes estrangement keeps people safe.

And here is why Jesus says — very clearly — that we must forgive our brothers and sisters *in our hearts*. It is here, in our innermost self, where forgiving another sets us free. It is *here*, and not around the Thanksgiving dinner table or at a family funeral or a high school graduation that our willingness to forgive has the greatest impact. It matters here, in our innermost selves. This is where God dwells within us, where he knows us better than we know ourselves, and where he wants us to be healthy.

We have a God who wants us to flourish, to know joy, to love deeply, to be truthful and just and merciful — and God knows that refusing to forgive does not invite us to become our fullest selves.

If all you do is forgive someone in your heart — you have actually done something radical, life-changing and important.

If you do not forgive in your heart, *it will torment you. It will diminish you*. That's just the way it works.

So do me a favor, try something: think of your grievances. Somebody wronged you or hurt you. Maybe they're still doing it. And if you just try to forgive — to pretend for a moment that you have — you may find the tightness in your chest to relax a little, and new feeling may surface. You may feel incredibly sad for them, you may feel incredibly sad for you. You may feel helpless, more so than you like. You may feel sad at the brokenness of humanity. These feelings are all excellent places from which to start praying.

Jesus knows this is not easy. He knows you. He knows you have a daughter in law who makes it hard to see your grandkids; spouse that says they'd pull their weight but is not pulling their weight; a father who was abusive; an adult child who makes bad decisions you have to pay for; and a family member who complicates everything.

If you do not forgive your sister and brother in your heart, it will torment you.

So try to forgive them. In your heart. You need not have a conversation or heal an estrangement. You may find that you want to; you may find that you can't just yet. That's not important now. What matters is that you see what happens when you forgive them in your heart, in your deepest self, where Good resides within you.

You just might feel the torment subside and you just might see the prison walls turn to dust.

This is grace.

Amen.