

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

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FORGIVENESS

its a relational activity

by Drew Downs

I think humans tend to speak in absolutes. Like this one. And we use these absolutes to help form moral clarity. This is essential to how we hear Jesus speak of forgiveness. Peter asks how many times he should forgive someone and it comes back to him as essentially, you're never going to exhaust your co-pay. So the reader can read this and go OK, we all need to forgive every time. Which is not exactly the point, but is close enough to it we won't fuss.

The thing about absolutes, however, is that they are deeply impersonal. They are rules of order, not reflections of a robust reality. So the questions is not what I do in a given scenario or what we do in every scenario, but about how are we doing as a people right now given the stuff that's happening? Every act of forgiveness is part of a web of interactions which invite new forgiveness. The point is not merely to get you to forgive, but that we all learn to forgive each other.

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WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

We're in the Human Business

An AI researcher quit the business this week, warning of the dangers they predict are coming. Other researchers are leaving the industry because of ethical problems they observe. Meanwhile, there seems to be a direct connection between age and support, with the young having the greatest disapproval.

There are more aspects of the conversation than can be had in this space, some of which I've written about before, including the negative and sustained cognitive impact of the use of Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT and Claude, the economic impact of an industry *intending* to destroy millions of jobs, and the ethical problem of using stolen goods as training data. We could also speak to the institutional problem of using LLMs to generate material that we therefore cannot own or the ease with which we can produce material that is becoming increasingly invisible because it looks like everything else. And honestly, those AI flyers are just spammy and ugly.

The more time we spend in the middle of Matthew's gospel, where Jesus keeps talking about relationships, the more I notice what he's not talking about: optimization, growth, efficiency, speed, perfection, skill, etc. He doesn't speak of markets or being left behind or having a computer write an email. And not just because computers didn't exist two thousand years ago. He is talking about sin as a relationship issue, not a problem to be solved with a singular solution. He talks about forgiveness as a relationship process and a means of restoration. That it doesn't just begin and ends with people, it is *only* relationship. There are no shortcuts. No having an LLM craft an apology so we just have to hit send. All we have is people, each other. That's the work and the point of the work.

With love,
Drew+

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FOR SUNDAY

Proper 19A

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Collect

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Reading

Matthew 18:21-35

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 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.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you

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pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' 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."

Reflection

Jesus has already stated what is at stake for the forgiver. How often must you forgive? Pretty much every time. And if you are the one who wants forgiveness, contrition is necessary. All of this is obvious. But now Jesus offers a teaching that puts all of this absoluteness into a relational scenario showing that your being forgiven is not to be isolated from your forgiving others.

This is a familiar tale of predictable selfishness. We see this in literature and life all of the time. We also see the inverse even more regularly—that one may come to understand the problem when it directly impacts them.

These stories work on the logical side of us by connecting our sense of right and wrong with a tendency to miss how this relates to our own behavior. And this is where the brilliance of the teaching lies. Because, after hearing all about how we are to forgive together, Peter makes it about himself. He asks about his own limits of forgiveness. And Jesus tells a parable about a man who is forgiven and doesn't forgive others. The point isn't what happens to that man, but how Peter and the disciples can avoid his fate.

And the answer is to forgive. But the reason that's the answer is that forgiveness is never just about what happens to the the forgiver. It is always relational. And the people who are forgiven are always put in positions to forgive others. It isn't that we neglect to forgive one time. It is how we become people of forgiveness.

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