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Forgiveness: the healing of relationships

Like all human formation, forgiveness comes, in the end, not as conquest but as gift, writes Michael Whelan SM.

BY Michael Whelan SM*

Relationships are at the core of our beings. We are made for relationships. We are constituted in and through relationships. We thrive in relationships. This should not surprise us as we are made in the image and likeness of that Eternal Community of Life and Love we call God.

All of us grow – or we do not – through four distinct but interrelated relationships: with God – however we name God – with ourselves, with other people and with the events and things of our world. Put most simply, spirituality is living relationships and religion is the incarnation of spirituality. Mysticism is the natural experience of unity that is – or ought to be – the deepest manifestation of spirituality and religion.

Relationships – when constructive rather than destructive – tend towards unity. The great paradox at the heart of this movement into unity is that it is the birthplace of diversity. When you love another you affirm the other as *other*, your love actually enables the other to be who and what she or he *is*. Love liberates. In becoming one through love our diversity as unique people is set free and finds fertile ground in which to thrive. We see this most obviously in a mature relationship between husband and wife.

A sad discovery that we all make along the way, however, is that relationships are problematic. They do not flourish, as it were, automatically. They are not necessarily liberating. They do not always and necessarily lead to unity. Relationships call for commitment, generosity and sometimes hard work if they are to be constructive and life-giving. More specifically, *all relationships need healing*. This is most particularly the work of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a critical part of our becoming deeply human therefore. Both believer and non-believer must submit to this truth. We simply cannot become human without the capacity to give *and* receive forgiveness.

Forgiveness and the healing of our relationships may be best understood as a *journey* – an ongoing journey – a daily constitutive part therefore of our being pilgrims. At the heart of that journey we call forgiveness is a *surrender*. We allow ourselves to be led – perhaps where we would rather not go.

Like all human formation, forgiveness comes, in the end, not as conquest but as gift. So, in the first instance, we proceed not by way of mastery but by way of facilitation. Forgiveness cannot be forced. We must learn to wait. The waiting and the facing of what must be faced, begets awareness and awareness brings us to truth. We submit and embrace the truth. In that embrace we are set free (see John 8:32). There is the healing.

The way of mastery feeds ego and ego is incapable of forgiveness. Ego is about control, forgiveness is about surrender – surrender to the forces that draw us into unity rather than those which alienate and divide. Forgiveness is grace. Forgiveness engenders gracious people. True forgiveness is a Mystery-centred experience. God is the beginning and end of all forgiveness. We forgive by participating in God's living and loving presence among us, everywhere, all the time.

That said, we can and must act and work with forgiveness in view. Yes, forgiveness is grace, but forgiveness is also work. Our work is by way of facilitation though. Our aim must be to make room for the Mystery to be experienced in the moment – any and every moment. "We must let go and let God be God in us" (Meister Eckhart).

Forgiveness takes us deeply into the Incarnation. Just about every teaching and event of Jesus' life recorded in the Gospels has something to do with forgiveness – that is, the healing of relationships. Consider for example John 8:1-11. We know the story very well. It is sometimes – inappropriately I believe – referred to as “The Woman Caught in Adultery”. This may be understood as essentially an event of forgiveness versus lack of forgiveness.

What if we were to think of ourselves as, alternately, the different players in this event – “the crowd”, “the scribes and Pharisees”, “the woman” or others unnamed like “the absent man”?

What is going on when they make her “stand in full view”? What is their motivation? What does the woman feel like?

What do you make of Jesus' responses? What is the mood of the moment when the scribes and Pharisees walk away and leave the woman alone with Jesus? What do you see on Jesus' face? What do you see on the face of the woman?

One part of the event that is particularly powerful is the threat of the woman being stoned to death. There are places in the world where this horrible, unforgiving punishment is a threat even today. An appreciation of the act of stoning another human being to death (see Deuteronomy 22:22-24) can shock us into some sense of what is really at stake here and what is on offer in Jesus.

How would you name this event? Why?

Interested in exploring this theme more?

Michael Whelan SM will lead a Lenten reflection day on Saturday March 3, 9:30 am to 3:30pm at Mount St Benedict Centre Pennant Hills where he will explore the topic “Forgiveness: A Way to Freedom”.

Cost \$30 (moming tea provided, BYO lunch). Please make bookings by February 27, 2012 on Ph: (02) 9484 86208 or Email: mtstbenedict@bigpond.com

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Source: <http://www.goodsams.org.au/good-oil/forgiveness-the-healing-of-relationships/>