

Forgiveness: Granting Forgiveness

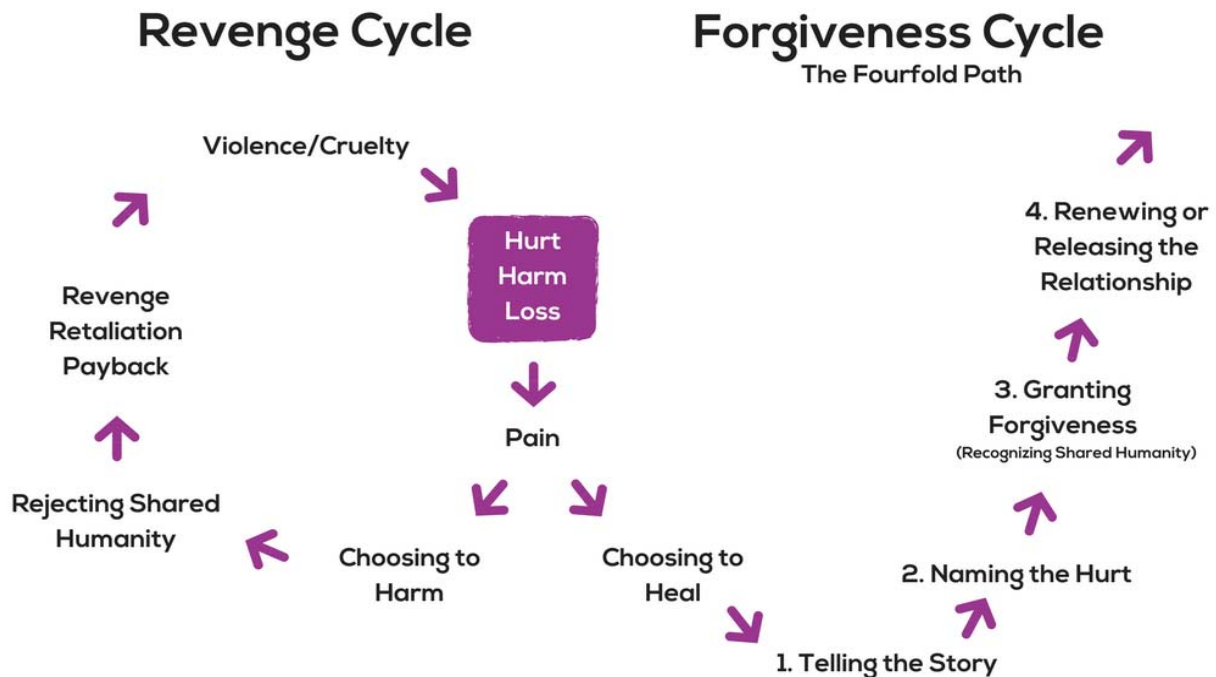
March 26, 2023 Tabor Heights & Montavilla United Methodist

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Luke 23:32-43 CEB

32 They also led two other criminals to be executed with Jesus. **33** When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. **34** Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." They drew lots as a way of dividing up his clothing. **35** The people were standing around watching, but the leaders sneered at him, saying, "He saved others. Let him save himself if he really is the Christ sent from God, the chosen one." **36** The soldiers also mocked him. They came up to him, offering him sour wine **37** and saying, "If you really are the king of the Jews, save yourself." **38** Above his head was a notice of the formal charge against him. It read "This is the king of the Jews." **39** One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" **40** Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to him, "Don't you fear God, seeing that you've also been sentenced to die? **41** We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong." **42** Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." **43** Jesus replied, "I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise."

Revenge Cycle & Forgiveness Cycle



This Lent, we are exploring the fourfold path of forgiveness from Tutu and Tutu's book, *The Book of Forgiving*. Drew is leading a book study on Wednesday evenings on Zoom. On Sunday mornings I am using Bible stories to illustrate the steps of the fourfold path.

For step one, Telling the Story, we explored how Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve from the book of Genesis, how their lives might have been different if Cain had told the story of how he was hurt as honestly as possible. How could Cain's life have been different if he had been honest with himself? How could our lives be different if we were honest with ourselves?

For step two, Naming the Hurt, we interrogated the story of David and Bathsheba, asking, why is Bathsheba's voice missing from the story? And naming some of the emotions that she and other victims of sexual assault like her, have felt. Because, "The only way to stop the pain is to accept it. The only way to accept it is to name it and, by naming it, to feel it fully." (p104 Book of Forgiving)

Today we are moving into step 3, Granting Forgiveness.

When something small, something annoying or mildly hurtful happens we can travel quickly through the fourfold path of forgiveness. For example: in the book Rev. Mpho shares a story of when her toddler accidentally broke a vase that was important to her.

Looking at the cycles flow chart:

- When the vase breaks, Rev Mpho experiences Loss
- Then she feels pain because of the loss. This is the decision point! From here she could have reacted by yelling or hurting or breaking one of her child's toys in retaliation.
- Instead she chooses healing. Knowing that healing requires us to do our internal work she,
- Tells the story honestly. Maybe just in her head, or maybe out loud. Her toddler was bouncing around like toddlers do, and they ran into the table the vase was on, it fell off and broke.
- She takes a minute to feel the hurt. Maybe just in her head, or maybe out loud to model naming our feelings for her toddler. "I'm sad that the vase my friend gave me is broken." In acknowledging her own emotions she is able to acknowledge her child's emotions, they are probably scared and startled and don't know how to respond.
- She grants forgiveness to her child. She loves her child and she is sad about the vase so she accepts that accidents happen, especially with toddlers, and she chooses to release the anger.

- She Renews the relationship with a hug and has her child hold the dustpan as she sweeps up the shards as a shared act of reparations.

That's the whole forgiveness cycle.

Now, any parent who has had a beloved child destroy a beloved possession can tell you that this is not easy! It takes serious commitment to choose healing rather than just reacting. But it's not just about teaching our children to be better humans, it's about choosing who we want to be. What kind of person we want to be. It's about choosing to follow the Way of Jesus, rather than just being a fan of Jesus.

But how do we forgive when the harm is serious? How do we forgive when the one who harmed us is old enough to know better? How do we recognize our shared humanity when we have been treated as if we are less than human?

I mentioned in the first sermon in this series that the Fourfold Path of Forgiveness is my favorite definition of forgiveness because I was abused as a child and forgiveness has been an important part of my own journey of healing. I know I'm not the only person who has suffered, so I want to show you how this process works when you have something big to forgive.

One again we begin with experiencing Hurt, Harm or Loss. My parents abused me from the time my father remarried after the death of my mother when I was 8 years old until I moved out of their house at the age of 14.

I did not choose the path of healing when I was 14. I was 14! I had no idea how to choose the path of forgiveness.

I remember my first Christmas after I moved out of my parent's house and in with my Great Aunt Alice. I showed up for the family Christmas Eve dinner, clean, with my hair and makeup done, wearing a nice, appropriate dress, and cute shoes -- all things I was never allowed to do in my parent's home. My stepmother made rude comments about my appearance and my aunts absolutely roasted her about her appearance. I felt vindicated! I felt powerful. I felt like my stepmother was getting a much deserved taste of her own medicine. Then, I found my stepmother crying in the hallway and I realized that her pain didn't take away my pain. For months that bled into years after that moment, even though I was now safely out of my parents house, I still felt the pain and the anger at everything I had suffered.

It is *exhausting* to carry around that much pain and rage. And it leaks out all over the rest of your life. Like you don't know how to form healthy relationships, partially because dysfunctional parents don't do a good job of modeling healthy relationships,

and partially because you just don't know how to trust people. It's like you're always playing defense because you never know who is going to hurt you next.

When I was 18 years old I encountered God in an altar call in the youth room in a Pentecostal church. The youth pastor asked us to raise our hands if we wanted to accept Jesus into our hearts and God, who was already in my heart and everywhere, God and I had a little silent conversation in my head where I said, "I will follow you, if you heal me, not just teach me how to live with the abuse, but really heal me,"

And God, in that still, small voice, agreed.

So I chose the path of healing.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I spent a lot of my teen and young adult years telling my story. Like, a lot, a lot. Like, will she ever shut up about her parents, a lot. Sometimes God sent me people who could listen non-judgmentally and help me see the truth more clearly, because the funny thing about growing up abused is that you don't really know what's normal parenting stuff that kids find annoying and what's abuse. Like I was equally angry that my parents wouldn't let me paint my nails or wear makeup in middle school as I was about my stepmother forbidding me to tell my father when she hit me. Just in case you also didn't know, not wearing makeup in a parenting choice, hiding physical abuse is abusive.

In my 20's I spent a lot of time trying to reconcile with my parents. Trying to name the hurt, since they always insisted that they didn't know what specifically they had done wrong, so *I* had to explain it to them. Of course, now I know that this is gaslighting, but it was actually helpful for me, especially as I was studying child abuse as a part of my bachelor's degree in social services. As I studied how people become abusers I learned how to look at a multigenerational family history and see the repeating patterns of abuse from generation to generation. Nobody says, I want to be an abuser when I grow up! We learn these dysfunctional patterns of behavior from our family of origin and from our culture, and often, each generation tries to do better, but without the tools to do better and the support to do better, there usually isn't much improvement.

In naming my own hurts, and exploring my family history, I learned that my father and my stepmother had also been hurt, and that they had spent so much time in the revenge cycle that they didn't really know how to exit the revenge cycle.

Jesus' words from the cross rang in my head for months.

"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

I saw that they were hurt people who had hurt me.

So I chose to forgive them. I even tried to reconcile with them. Even though they continued to gaslight me and pretend that I was the one who needed to be nicer to them.

Then I had children.

I looked at my children and I saw just how small and vulnerable and trusting and fragile and perfect and innocent they were and all of my hard won understanding went right out the window as the true magnitude of what it means to harm a child hit me.

And I went through the whole forgiveness cycle again...for every single developmental stage my children went through.

1. Telling the story at every age and stage and wondering how on earth anyone could do what was done to me to a vulnerable child?!
2. Naming the hurt...every specific hurt of being so vulnerable and unable to protect yourself.
3. Recognizing again and again and again, just how much my parents must have suffered in their own childhoods to think that what they had done was OK. And choosing to forgive them, again and again, and again. Sometimes multiple times a day. Praying, Father forgive them, because they really didn't know what they were doing! Even when I really didn't feel like forgiving them.
4. Trying to reconcile my relationship with my family of origin in a way that was safe for my children... which became harder and harder as I got healthier and my boundaries got healthier. My grandmother took all my pictures off her walls when I told her that I would not allow my uncle, the pedophile, around my children. Reconciliation is hard when the people who harmed you don't want to do their own forgiveness path work.

When the harm is complex and ongoing, forgiveness can take multiple cycles through the path.

Not because we are bad at forgiveness, but because we have a lot to forgive. And with each story, each hurt, each journey, we are faced once again with the choice.

Do we want to be like the guy on the cross who mocks others' pain and perpetuates the cycle of harm...

...or do we want to be the guy on the other cross who recognizes that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God?

Because not suffering, not having a cross to bear, is just not an option in this life.

I am not a perfect parent. I am a hurt person who has hurt others and who tries to choose the path of healing as often as I can. And I thank God, that by God's grace I have managed to do a lot less harm to my kids than was done to me. Not none. But significantly less. And I have learned how to apologize and make reparations in my personal life, which has led me to an interest in reconciliation and reparations in my ministry life.

Because just as hurt people hurt people... when we don't know how, or aren't willing to, to choose the path of healing...

Healed people heal people. When we do choose the path of healing, we spread healing around us.

Washing the Stone

So I want to invite you into another stone ritual.

I brought extra rocks, because it's easy to forget our pet rocks!

Barton/Christina will play some music for us and I invite you to come forward with your stone, or take one from the basket, and bring it to the baptismal font.

In our Christian tradition, baptism is the waters of new birth. We are baptized into God's church as babies or at any age as a symbol of our acceptance and forgiveness before or after we do anything right or wrong.

So I invite you, if you feel ready, to bring those who have harmed you to the waters of baptism and dunk a rock in acknowledgement of the fact that none of the beautiful babies who have been baptized plans to hurt people when they grow up.

Cain didn't plan to become a murderer. David didn't grow up planning to assault women while he tended his sheep.

The beautiful blue eyed, black haired baby that my grandmother brought to be baptized in the Lutheran Church didn't know he would grow up to kick his 14 year old daughter out of his house.

We are all children of God when we come to the waters of baptism.

So, if it feels right, dunk a rock for one or more people who have hurt you.

Maybe share in Jesus' words.

Father forgive them. They didn't know what they were doing.