

FORGIVENESS

The Keystone of Human Values



Forgiveness begins with grace, yet it comes to fruition only through a lot of hard, and often painful, work. This article is the result of a number of years of using this topic as the second in a series of programmes for parish mission retreats, writes **Fr BRIAN CAVANAUGH, TOR**

In the late 1980s, I was invited to speak at the annual conference of the Mid-East Honors Association (MEHA), comprised of university honours students from a number of states. The conference theme for that year focused on 'wellness' issues. Initially, I was asked to address the topic of 'spiritual wellness,' and I wanted to focus on biblical-based concepts of personal self-worth—being created in the image and likeness of God who refers to each of us as *very good*.

About two weeks prior to the conference, I received a frantic phone call from the student organiser. They couldn't find anyone to cover 'emotional wellness.' Would I consider taking on a second topic? I didn't have a clue what to say, but for some reason, I agreed; a blessed decision in hindsight.

This second request occurred during the Lenten season, and the topic of forgiveness clearly was on my mind. As I thought about what to say concerning emotional wellness, I fixed my attention on the word wellness for insight. Hoping for a brainstorm, I thought about the obverse of wellness, and wrote down on a legal pad—'disease'. As I focused on the pad, I noticed disease was actually made up of two words: dis+ease. What makes us dis-eased in light of wellness? The fruits of my Lenten reflections identified several 'dis-eases,' namely, anger, bitterness, self-pity, revenge, envy, pride and guilt. This is not an exhaustive list of dis-eases but, rather, representative examples. And, it is forgiveness that brings forth wellness!

My brain cells now started working on the theme,

until I realised that most of the conference attendees would be non-Catholic and, in fact, a significant number would probably be non-Christian. Now, I wondered, how can anyone address the topic of "forgiveness" without mentioning Jesus Christ or the Bible? I thought I was back at square-one all over again.

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This conundrum led me to my journals of quotations and stories that I've been collecting since 1977, fifty-six volumes to date. Browsing through the volumes seeking an idea, I had an epiphany that clarified my preparations. The insight was that forgiveness is the "keystone of human values," not just Christian values. It would seem that most of the sacraments have their counterpoints in the general human society. We celebrate a child's entry into a family, and rites of passage into adulthood; we celebrate marriage, and death; we celebrate around a table with Thanksgiving. But I wondered, how many societies celebrate 'forgiveness' as a significant moment?

This turned out to be just the 'hook' needed to connect emotional wellness with the theme of forgiveness; it resonated well with those students. I realised, then, I was onto a topic that also would strike a chord with other audiences.

Have you ever received one of those ubiquitous Christmas family letters detailing events from the past year? Consider this email I received with an anonymous attribution:

'What a year! We had our baby, Johnny. Aunt Ida died, and my father-in-law is dying in a nursing home. With the school parents' group and the natural joys and sorrows of four children, I feel as if we're on a perpetual emotional roller coaster. Our next door neighbour has kicked her teenage daughter out of the house and told her not to come back. Another neighbour and mother of four had a nervous breakdown. And the friendly couple down the street have become alcoholics. What we need in this town is for someone to come along to show us what the meaning of this crazy life is and to preach "Forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness." Isn't it strange how everything seems to boil down either to being unable on one's own to forgive others, or to feeling guilty and unforgiven yourself.'

Now that's a profound thought to mull over: 'Everything seems to boil down either to being unable on one's own to forgive others, or to feeling guilty and unforgiven yourself.' Forgiveness, however, will bring about wellness for others, and for yourself, as well.

Some time ago, I remember reading about a survey questionnaire, that inquired of health care professionals, "What is the percentage of your weekly patients who have needs you are not capable of treating with medical skills?" What would you think that percentage would be? The answers to the survey revealed that only 10% of weekly patients were able to be treated by medical means, but that the remaining 90% suffered real pain, but not with physical roots. They suffer from psychological pain caused by anger, bitterness, envy, pride and self-pity. These, likewise, produce emotional cancers of stress, depression and ulcers which can kill, not only the spirit, but the body as well.

At the beginning of the twenty-first millennium, The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) published an insightful study on the nature of forgiveness entitled 'Forgiveness: Theory, Research and Practice'. In it the authors foresee that forgiveness will be the key area of psychotherapy in the 21st century—'...perhaps the 21st century will find its way out of the 20th century's crimson shadow. In achieving these latter goals, perhaps forgiveness will play a role.' Further, they point out that forgiveness can be 'one way to reduce conflict and hostility, as well as to promote understanding and respect...to diminish unresolved hurt and pain that burdens many...'

Forgiveness Begins the Process

Already in this first decade of this new century, we realise that there is an even greater need to 'reduce conflict and hostility,' and 'to promote understanding and respect' within and among individual persons, communities, as well as nations. Forgiveness begins the process to

initiate healing, not just of the mind, heart and soul, but of the body, as well.

I remember reading about a woman in the early 1900s who went to her doctor with a catalogue of complaints about her health. The physician examined her thoroughly and became convinced that there was nothing physically wrong with her. He suspected it was her negative outlook on life—her bitterness and resentment—that was the key to her feeling the way she did.

The wise physician took the woman into a back room in his office where he kept some of his medicine. He showed her a shelf filled with empty bottles. He said to her: "See those bottles. Notice that they are all empty. They are shaped differently from one another, but basically they are all alike. Most importantly, they have nothing in them. Now, I can take one of these

bottles and fill it with poison—enough poison to kill a human being. Or I can fill it with enough medicine to bring down a fever, or ease a throbbing headache or fight bacteria in one part of the body. The important thing is that I make the choice. I can fill it with whatever I choose."

The doctor looked her in the eye and said, "Each day that we are given is basically like one of these empty bottles. We can choose to fill it with love and life-affirming thoughts and attitudes, or we can fill it with destructive, poisonous thoughts. The choice is ours." And what will you choose? Life-affirming, positive, healing thoughts? Or, the seething poisons of anger, bitterness and prejudice? The choice is yours! Yes, the choice is yours, and that is also the problem.

Prevent Hardening of the Attitudes

Long ago, I listened to a tape of Zig Ziglar, a well-known motivational speaker, who understands the concept of 'dis-eases.' In this tape, Ziglar talks about a variant dis-ease from which we all suffer, once past the age of eighteen. As I've gotten older, I've had more opportunities to consider the implications of arthritis than I really would prefer. I've discovered that there isn't a cure for arthritis, at least not yet, but there is an effective remedy—stretch and flex. As we must do for the body, so we must do for the mind and the spirit—stretch and flex. Otherwise, the heart, mind and spirit begin to stiffen, and then harden, until they become rigid, more like a shell. And it is just a short distance to becoming a tomb for your heart, your mind and your spirit. Stretch and flex, even when it hurts. It's supposed to!

Visit Fr Brian Cavanaugh's website www.appleseeds.org

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