

"Practicing Radical Forgiveness"

a Sermon Delivered by Seth Carrier, Ministerial Intern
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Forgiveness is not just about healing relationships. "She cheated on me and it took me years to forgive her." OR "My sister stole my clothes and jewelry for years and denied it. We're closer now, but things are still not good between us." OR "Dad consistently forgot to show up to my soccer games and piano concerts and it took me years to forgive him." This is how we traditionally tend to think about forgiveness, right?

But what do we do when we do not have a willing partner in the healing process? What do we do if the person who has wronged us does not think they've done wrong, or they just don't care? What do we do if this person is no longer in our lives? What do we do if the person is dead?

I was really socially awkward as a teenager, and I have held on to one story in particular for almost 20 years. My music teacher in junior high, Mr. Richter, started class off one morning by asking if anyone had seen the re-run of Golden Girls that had been on the night before. Now I was one of those over-eager kids, always aiming please. So of course, I raised my hand excitedly, "I did. I did." Mr. Richter said, "Well, there was this funny conversation where a kid was explaining to two of the Golden Girls the difference between a dork and a geek. But I don't remember exactly what he said." That wasn't a problem, I remembered the exchange clearly, and proceeded to repeat it almost verbatim to the entire class. When I was done, Mr. Richter said, "Well thank you Seth. You know, the reason I brought it up was because it made me think of you."

I was devastated. And I held on to that devastation for a long time afterwards. In my 20's, I would go over and over this experience in my head. I dreamed about tracking down Mr. Richter and going to see him. I planned on telling him, in pretty plain language, how completely insensitive he was to make me, one of his students, a kid he was responsible for, feel that small and insignificant. It's only recently that I've been

able to heal most of that pain and begin to forgive him. And I'm still not all the way there, even now. For me, this is a prime example of how forgiveness is not in the end about getting an apology from someone. I was carrying that pain and hurt around for a long time, and it was not hurting Mr. Richter – the only person it was hurting was me.

According to Dr. Fred Luskin, Director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, I had constructed a "grievance story," which is where you tell yourself and others a victim story over and over again. The problem with grievance stories is that they do not accomplish anything. Instead, they leave us stewing in our own hurt and pain. There is definitely a natural grieving process that we go through when we're wronged. We're usually angry and hurt, we rehearse the narrative in our minds, and we share the painful story with others. If we become bogged down in the story, though, and continually revisit the pain, we don't move forward.

I spoke with a woman once, who shared with me each major grievance she ever experienced. It was actually pretty remarkable to listen to – starting in kindergarten, with the teacher who corrected her unfairly for knocking over a glass of water that someone else spilled, to first grade where the teacher threw an eraser at her, to second grade... it just kept on going, all the way up. This woman was stuck in pain, hurt and resentment. In fact, the word "resentment" comes from the root word "ressentir," meaning "to feel again." And this is exactly what this woman was doing – reliving those experiences with me, and I'm sure she did it with others too. She kept feeling the same pain, decades-old pain, over and over again. I don't know about you, but that sounds terrible to me, reliving feelings of pain and hurt, over and over, without an end in sight.

I mean, if I asked, "Would you like some pain, hurt, and anger, to store in your body and stew over for the next ten years?" would you jump up and down and say, "Oh, yes, please, that sounds great!" Probably not. And yet this is exactly what we do when we hold on to and live in our grievance stories. We give over our personal power to the individual who hurt us. We let their past actions dominate our present experience.

When we live in our grievance stories, we do not allow ourselves to heal. We do not allow there to be peace in our hearts.

I'm talking about a very specific kind of peace here, a deep and meaningful peace. We can push hurts and wounds aside, we can repress them, we can compartmentalize them, and we may achieve some sense of peace in the moment, or even in many moments. But pain and hurt that is set aside within us, it's still there, it does not go away. Carrying around pain and hurt inside is like being required to put on a backpack of heavy rocks and carry it around all day. At a certain point, if we're carrying this backpack around all the time our bodies simply adjust to what we're carrying, and we forget it's there. We may get reminders that it's there, though. Our backs may get sore, and we may need to shift or adjust the straps occasionally. But when we carry this backpack around, day after day, week after week, the weight tends to fade into the background. It starts to feel normal.

If someone were to come along, though, and lift out a few of those heavy rocks, you would immediately notice that you felt lighter. You may be so used to carrying the backpack that you weren't consciously aware that you were carrying something heavy, but as soon as the rocks come out, you definitely notice that the burden is lighter.

This lightness, this removal of weight, is the kind of peace in your heart that forgiveness brings about. Shifting rocks of pain and hurt around, putting them out of your conscious awareness –that can bring some sense of peace and comfort. But the weight is still there, the pain is still there, the grievance story is still there, even if we aren't consciously aware of it.

Choosing forgiveness is choosing to undergo the process of taking rocks out of your bag. Rocks of pain and hurt are not easy to remove. But as we begin to heal, the rocks will come out. We may never empty our backpacks completely, but every time we choose the path of forgiveness and healing, and take one more of those grievance story rocks out of our backpack, there is greater peace in our hearts.

A friend of mine, Richard, faced this very choice. Thirty years ago he was confronted with a terrible act of violence, an act of violence that harmed someone he loved dearly.

Richard was an honorable man, who cared deeply for his family. He and his wife served as diplomats for 8 years in Hong Kong, where they adopted a 2-year old Russian baby, named Eugenia, or Jaina for short. Jaina was a smart kid, but she struggled after her family returned to the U.S., barely managing to enroll at Washington State University for college, and hanging out with the wrong kind of people. During her sophomore year of college, Jaina went to a hotel in the seedier part of town looking to buy marijuana. Only 19-years old, the dealer she went to meet raped and murdered her.

Richard's world was turned upside down. His only daughter was gone, and nothing was going to bring her back. Jaina's attacker was quickly captured, put on trial, and received a 20-year sentence. But despite this quick "justice," Richard could not get past his daughter's death. The basic tasks of daily life were nearly impossible for him to manage. He took early retirement two years after Jaina's death. In his own words, "I kept my daughter's death to myself. I suppressed it. I didn't go through an authentic grieving process."

Richard kept this rock in his backpack for a long time. The turning point, the choice to begin the path towards healing and forgiveness, did not come until several years later. When he started treatment for clinical depression, Richard made a choice to move forward. By this point he had moved back to New Hampshire, and at the suggestion of his pastor, he became part of a prison Bible fellowship program as part of his healing process. The fellowship program led him to the volunteer for a non-profit organization that offers weekend-long workshops to incarcerated people, helping them learn alternative responses to conflict besides violence. Over the course of many weekends, Richard heard the stories of incarcerated people. He learned about their struggles. He learned about the crime-ridden communities in which many of them grew up.

Richard spent many hours with these men, men who came from similar backgrounds as the man who murdered his daughter, men who had committed similar crimes. And he gained first-hand knowledge of their humanity. He even began to see something of his daughter in the men he was working with. “They are angry and alienated,” he said, “and at the same time... [they are also] looking for love and acceptance.” Volunteering with these men helped Richard to heal, so much so that he eventually came to the following conclusion: “I have come to understand that everyone has a spark of the divine.”

Richard spent the last twenty years of his life volunteering in prisons, helping incarcerated people learn about empathy, compassion, non-violence and healing. Again, in his own words, “I believe the work I do now in prison and with ex-prisoners honors and gives significance to my daughter's life. In forgiving her killer without condoning his heinous action, I am free to get on with my life, no longer imprisoned by rage or grief, and this has been very healing for me.”

Richard was not a Buddhist, he was a Congregationalist through and through, but his experience and actions remind me very much of the Buddhist Loving-Kindness meditation. In this spiritual practice, one begins by meditating on loving him or herself. The goal is to feel love and connection with your own being. The next step is to meditate on loving someone who you respect and care about, which is fairly easy for most. Third, you meditate on a neutral person, a stranger, loving them, sending them loving energy. While this is slightly outside the norm for some, it's still usually fairly easy to practice. The hard part is the final meditation. The practice asks you to meditate on loving someone you dislike, to send loving energy towards someone against whom you have feelings of ill-will.

It seems to me that Richard lived this practice of Buddhist Loving-Kindness in his life. He worked first on loving and healing himself. Then, when he was ready, he worked on loving and helping neutral people, incarcerated people in prison with whom he had no direct connection. Finally, through this work of trying to love and heal others, he was

able to move into forgiveness of the man who murdered his daughter. He was able to see that this man who had committed terrible acts of violence, that even he had a spark of the divine within.

Richard was an amazing man, and the radical forgiveness he practiced is not something everyone can or is willing to do. My experience with my music teacher was nowhere near as severe as Richard's experience of his daughter's death. But he forgave, and in fact radically forgave with love, while I have yet to be able to do that completely. Forgiveness, while a choice, is not always an easy thing to do. But we have to try. If we don't, we're just letting the pain and hurt fester inside us. We are all carrying backpacks of rocks around with us all the time. We all have pains and wounds we carry, grievance stories and otherwise.

How might your experience of daily life be different if you were to choose the path of forgiveness and healing, regardless of whether you had a willing partner in the process? How might the world be a different place if each and every one of us attempted to practice the kind of radical love suggested by the Buddhist Loving-Kindness meditation? How might the world be a different place, if we all tried to practice the kind of radical forgiveness that Richard lived?

This radical forgiveness, radically forgiving with love, this is our challenge. We must try to let go of our grievance stories, we must stop letting pain, hurt and resentment stew inside us for weeks, months, years and even decades. For our own sakes, we must take some of these rocks out of our backpacks. And then, as we practice radical forgiveness, as we heal ourselves, we can then reach out with love and compassion to those doing harm in the world. We can begin to try and see the spark of the divine in all of us.

If there's to be forgiveness in the world,
 There must be forgiveness in the nations.
If there's to be forgiveness in the nations,
 There must be forgiveness in the cities.
If there's to be forgiveness in the cities,
 There must be forgiveness between neighbors.
If there's to be forgiveness between neighbors,
 There must be forgiveness in the home.
If there's to be forgiveness in the home,
 There must be forgiveness in the heart.

May your heart be filled with forgiveness.