

“A Sermon for Trinity Sunday”

by Teresa Ramsey

May 31, 2015



Trinity Sunday

Greetings to each of you this Trinity Sunday.

I offered to speak today on a subject that is not directly related to today's lectionary readings.

The readings center on the Trinity. It is just as well for all of us that I am not addressing this subject. The doctrine of the Trinity is challenging for me and many others. I have no formal religious training in a seminary or otherwise. I know that many of those present have this training and in fact can be quite brilliant when addressing theological matters. I would not presume to offer my thoughts about God from a theological perspective because, quite frankly, God is simply too big and too complicated for me to grasp with my mind. So today I wish to share instead from my own limited experience about a topic I do know something about from both my head and my heart. My topic is forgiveness.

There is much to ponder in regard to forgiveness. I do not wish to address in this sermon the quality of forgiveness that God offers to us. Rather, I propose to approach this topic from the perspective of one who is trying to follow Jesus' command as expressed to Peter in Mathew Chapter 18, Verse 21 in response to Peter's question as to how many times we are to

forgive our brother, 7 times? Jesus answers "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven." I don't know about you, but there have been people in my life that I had a hard time forgiving even once. How, given our basically selfish natures, can we forgive others, especially those we are close too (read relatives, spouses or ex-spouses etc)?

As I have shared before, I have learned most of what I know about how to live my life according to God's plan for me through the 12 step program of AA. I had heard the command expressed in the new testament that I should forgive, but it was in AA that I learned how to forgive, I also learned a most unexpected reason why I should forgive. This is what I want to share.

The steps of the program are in a particular order for many good reasons. One step prepares you for the next one. After I admitted my life was unmanageable and turned my will and my actions over to God, the next step was to take a fearless and searching moral inventory of myself. One of the first steps in that moral inventory is to list all persons I resented. Another way of saying resentment is holding a grudge. The big book says that:

Resentment is the "number one" offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stem all forms of spiritual disease, for have we been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick,.....In dealing with resentments, we set them on paper. We listed people, institutions or principles with whom we were angry. We asked ourselves why we were angry. In most cases it was found that our self-esteem, our pocketbooks, our ambitions, our personal relationships (including sex) were hurt or threatened.....To conclude that others were wrong was as far as most of us got, [Turning to the list] We were prepared to look at it from an entirely different angle. We began to see that the world and

its people really dominated us. In that state, the wrong-doing of others, fancied or real, had the power to actually kill. How could we escape?...This was our course: We realized that the people who wronged us were perhaps spiritually sick....We asked God to help us show them the same tolerance, pity and patience that we would cheerfully grant a sick friend...

...Putting out of our minds the wrongs others had done, we resolutely looked for our own mistakes. Where had we been selfish, dishonest, self-seeking, and frightened? Though a situation had not been entirely our fault, we tried to disregard the other person involved entirely. Where were we to blame? When we saw our faults we listed them. We placed them before us in black and white. We admitted our wrongs honestly and were willing to set these matters straight. [\[1\]](#)

Some of you may ask, what does this have to do with forgiveness? Forgiveness is tricky. The people we have a hard time forgiving are the people we have hurt. What? How can that be? First of all, I learned that the human mind, mine included, is devious. In an effort to protect our fragile egos, the mind systematically transfers blame from itself to others until the self is justified and the other is entirely at fault. In my case, as I examined the names on my resentment list, the names of those who hurt me and for whom I had a grudge, I was instructed to reflect NOT upon the culpability of the offended but on what part I had in it. Really? I truly doubted that I had much fault at all so began with someone I was certain was almost totally at fault and prayed and meditated about the situation. To my horror I began to see that I had not behaved well at all. In fact, if we had traded places I would have blamed myself for all the bad feelings. One by one I worked down the list. There was my former mother-in-law. Surely she harmed me many times with her slights and judgements. Yet, when I honestly thought

about what I had done "in response" I had to admit much fault. What was going on here? As saw and listed my faults I learned that I rationalize my own bad behavior but judge the same or lesser behavior in others harshly. I can come up with twenty reasons to justify my own bad acts, but offer no such explanations for the acts of others. Later in my step work I came to the part about making a list of all those persons that I had harmed. I found that they were pretty much the same people for whom I had a resentment earlier. As I made direct amends to such people whenever possible, focusing only on the harm I did and expecting nothing in return, the walls I had built between me and them came down. My resentment against that person was over and I was free.

This is not intuitive stuff. I thought I was owed an apology and in some instances I was. But I have no control over that. I do have some control over looking first at the harms I have done to others and making it right. This explains the following verse: [Matthew 5:23-24](#)

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift

[Luke 6:42](#)

How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

In the 12 step process I learned to turn my critical, fault-finding eye inward instead of outward. Yes, the real culprit for the most part was me. This knowledge was both painful and humiliating. It was the start of real self-knowledge and humility. I can't say I no longer blame others. But I do know that if I see a pattern in what I think other people are doing

“to me” that I am most likely projecting one of my own issues on others.

At Matthew Chapter 18 verses 23-29, the “Parable of the Unmerciful Servant” is one of Jesus major treatments of forgiveness.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

The servant fell on his knees before him. “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.” The servant’s master had pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

But when the servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one-hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. “Pay back what you owe me!” he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, “be patient with me, and I will pay you back.”

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. “You wicked servant,” he said, “I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”

In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all that is

owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

In his analysis of this parable, Robert Capon comments that “[In this parable} there is only one unpardonable sin, and that is to withhold pardon from others. The only thing that can keep us out of the joy of the resurrection is to join the unforgiving servant in his refusal to die [to his old life].”[\[2\]](#)

My own experience is that until I systematically forgave each person on my grudge list but identifying how I had in fact harmed them and made amends to them all, I was unable to forgive myself or to accept God’s forgiveness. Self-forgiveness and acceptance of God’s freely offered forgiveness are the unexpected benefits of practicing forgiveness.

I have had sponsees who held onto a grudge based on a need for vengeance and personal justice, waiting for the other person to admit that they harmed them, which was never going to happen. I advised them to pray daily for such persons, asking for all the blessings for their tormentor that they want for themselves and asking God to increase their willingness to forgive. Within a few weeks of engaging in this process, they were able to forgive from the heart thus freeing themselves by releasing the resentment and lifting a weight from their soul.

The one set free by forgiveness is you.

[\[1\]](#) Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th Edition, 2001, Pages 66-67.

[\[2\]](#) Kingdom, Grace, Judgment. Robert Farrar Capon, 2002, Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Co., Page 200