

Forgiveness as a Measure of Resilience

Forgiveness is having somewhat of a renaissance in the contemporary world. In this short presentation I want to open up some of the issues which I see as constitutive in a theological (as opposed to say, a psychological) model of forgiveness. Since forgiveness is often dismissed as a retreat to the enclaves of piety or even as the attempt to condone abusive behaviour I would like to point to the resilience which is entailed by the practice of a radical (ie., theological) notion of forgiveness. I should say just a little about how I understand resilience. A dictionary definition speaks of the capacity to 'spring back' or 'resume original form' and to me this is reminiscent of the understanding of power as interpreted by Process Philosophy. It says that power is the capacity to be acted upon, and yet not be overwhelmed. So, let us begin with some points, some of which I will develop further:

1. Forgiveness, where and when offered, is inevitably accusatory. To say, 'I forgive you,' is to entail, 'I accuse you.' And if I, as the person to whom the word of forgiveness is addressed, accept that offer of forgiveness, then I implicitly accept the accusation, too. Forgiveness implies recognition on the part of both the victim and the perpetrator of the state of affairs that led to the offer of forgiveness. In the choice between anamnesis (remembrance) and amnesia, the weight falls upon the former. Thus forgiveness is definitely not an easy option. It is certainly not easy for the victim, nor it is particularly easy for the perpetrator if it is to be accepted by them;
2. From a Christian perspective forgiveness is driven by a theological imperative. This does not imply that forgiveness is not therapeutic; that it may not help the victim to 'move on' in his or her life, but it is to say that a solely therapeutic understanding of forgiveness is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for forgiveness within a Christian paradigm. To understand and appreciate this is to imply a level of resilience by which we are prepared to move beyond the 'what's in it for me?' question;
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily equate with reconciliation. It may be the case that reconciliation does, in some cases, follow from forgiveness. But there are good reasons to suppose that it does not—and indeed cannot—follow in all. Similarly, reconciliation may not necessarily involve forgiveness, as for example in the South African experience of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission;
4. In connection with the previous point, there is now a substantial body of theological and philosophical literature that argues that forgiveness (as the word implies in English, French and German) is a gift, and as such does not restore balance or symmetry between human relationships. Jacques Derrida would be an example of this position when he maintains that forgiveness is most itself where there is no balance or economic exchange between the victim and the perpetrator;

5. As a consequence of this alleged lack of balance or symmetry, forgiveness, understood from the perspective of this hyperbolic ethic, may, and indeed often does, offend our sense of justice. I would suggest that when this happens forgiveness is being interpreted in a way that is more rather than less theological;
6. There are evident dangers present in any discourse on forgiveness. A primary danger is the potential for manipulation of the victim by suggesting to him or her that 'one ought to forgive' – this can all too obviously lead to re-victimisation (and this is not what I mean by resilience). We are rightly wary of urging others to forgive those who have offended or abused them. It is the victim's prerogative to forgive – only he or she may properly take the initiative and only he or she may decide if and when the time is right. But how shall people decide if there exists no public discourse on forgiveness to which they might turn for consideration.

Is Forgiveness Just?

What if the answer to this question is No? In terms of our usual understandings of justice I want to suggest that might just be the case. Forgiveness, it seems, at least for many Christians, is interpreted through the lens of some sort of atonement theory. Now it may be true that this notion is rather vague and ill-defined, but it nevertheless provides some explanation for why so many people imagine that forgiveness (either requested by another or granted by oneself) is a way of making things right again. Forgiveness, we think, restores the playing field to its original level. This, we imagine, is what happens in the case of atonement where some restitution is made—generally by some form of sacrificial action, and thus balance and symmetry are restored. Indeed the very words we use to describe forgiveness imply such a restoration of symmetry. 'I wanted to make it right again,' we say. 'I wanted to get back on an even keel.' Well, sometimes forgiveness does bring about that balance, but equally, at other times it doesn't. Does that make forgiveness an unworthy option?

Let us look at the way we often consider and approach forgiveness. The more possible forgiveness is; the more reasonable forgiveness is; the more sensible, prudential and equitable forgiveness is; the more it slides into a rule of economy, a calculation, a way of squaring accounts and of producing symmetry. In much of our classical philosophy and theology, forgiveness is inscribed within what we may call an economic order according to which it can be 'given' only under certain conditions. What are these conditions? We know them well, repentance is one. If the offender admits he is wrong and asks to be forgiven; if he expresses sorrow; if he means to fix the damage insofar as that is possible; and if he promises to avoid repeating the offence in the future, then, and only then, is he forgiven. It's at this very point that

the deal is struck, the exchange is made and reconciliation and consequent balance and symmetry follow. The offender meets the conditions, pays off the debt and thus in a peculiar sense is actually *owed* forgiveness. Anything else would be unfair. This is what we usually take to be meant by forgiveness. And we understand this, because this, we think, is possible. It seems reasonable and sensible. It's prudential. If you say 'sorry,' I'll forgive you. But what if you won't say 'sorry,' or can't – perhaps for the best of all reasons (you're dead)?

But what might things look like if we commenced from the other end, so to speak. Let us commence with the idea that forgiveness is unreasonable; that it is imprudent; that it's wildly extravagant; that it demands risk; that it's a gracious act. Not surprisingly such a view of forgiveness will strike us as counter-intuitive. What if forgiveness were not symmetrical; not economic? What if forgiveness is given to the other person unconditionally, even when the other doesn't ask for forgiveness, does not repent or plan to make amends? Would such a negative response (or more properly, a non-response) nullify one's offer of forgiveness? We had best hope not. One might suggest, as does Derrida, that there is forgiveness as such just when there is no hint of a deal, no sign from the other side that they intend to keep the peace, no sign of equilibrium. Let us push this a little more, and suggest that there is forgiveness even and especially when the other had done something that is unforgivable; something which would represent an extreme disturbance of economy, equilibrium and symmetry. There is forgiveness—according to this perspective—just when it appears impossible; just when forgiveness is not only **not** owed to the perpetrator, but when it is unimaginable. On this understanding the unforgivable is the correlate of forgiveness.

Let us now consider another perspective. Some years ago a man suffered the death of his wife and daughters because the house in which they were living had been deliberately torched by someone with the intent of murdering the occupants. The perpetrator was caught and subsequently convicted of the offence. The man whose family had been killed was half out of his mind with grief. No one would have blamed him had he harboured feelings of revenge (and indeed had he acted on them) toward the person in gaol. Instead most people were amazed to discover that he went to visit the perpetrator in gaol and made it very clear that he had forgiven him. However he also made it clear that this forgiveness was not done out of compassion for the person in custody, but so that he, the grieving father, could get on with his life. He believed, probably correctly, that hatred and the inability to forgive would stunt any further psychological growth on his part. In order to move on, he had to forgive. In the words of Tom Uren (who had his own experience as an aid to reflection) 'there's no future in hate.' It was as

simple and calculated as that. Note also that his forgiveness was not conditional upon anything extraneous to himself. He did not require sorrow, still less contrition, from the person in gaol. Neither did he feel himself to be under any constraint—except the internal one to which I have already adverted—to forgive. It was not done because it was somehow ‘right’. Still less was it done for the sake of a theological imperative. It was done for purely pragmatic reasons (and let us admit they were the best of reasons) that he might move on with his life. ‘Ah,’ breathed the populace, ‘this we can understand.’ And why?—because it spoke to us of prudential behaviour. But maybe, just maybe, forgiveness is actually more than this.