

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 10, 2009 at 11:37am

A Lenten exercise in forgiveness

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

The saga of Jesus careens and rollicks as he faces off against sinister forces of his day. Not unlike the action thriller *The Bourne Identity*, but without sports cars going airborne in flames. The story begins in a small town on the outskirts of a brutal empire. He gets wise to religious and political corruption and marches through the countryside to gather the marginalized. Together they follow the dangerous trail of money, from Galilee to one of the world's most powerful financial institutions, the Jerusalem Temple, a banking system of such imperial corruption that it fleeces the poor in the name of God.

Jesus arrives at the imposing gates to demand that justice be served. And the powers-that-be fight back, and predictable is the outcome: Jesus suffers arrest, abandonment, trial, imperial condemnation, and legal torture.

So far the story goes according to type, albeit of heroic heights. But as the pages rustle in our hands, a surprise ending lies in store, a surprise even by the standards of surprising endings. Our eyes widen. We lean forward anticipating the appearance of a legion of angels. Or a descending *deus ex machine* to set matters right. But neither of these; rather something more extraordinary yet. With his last breath, his eyes gray with pain and failure, Jesus forgives his murderers.

Some might imagine the shocker being the uncorking of the account of the resurrection. But I doubt it. After Jesus' stunning act of grace and forbearance, the resurrection now strikes the mind as inevitable, natural. Placed as it is, the resurrection comes off almost as anti-climactic.

And from this I take a message: the path toward resurrection goes through forgiveness.

Christian discipleship necessitates a few things: creative nonviolence, universal love, peaceable wholeness, and steadfast resistance to injustice. But it requires a thing more ? forgiveness toward those

who have hurt us, rejected us. To reach such Gospel heights, we need to practice forgiveness as a daily discipline. Lent is a good time to ritualize forgiveness toward those who have hurt us, to make it a practice that becomes the norm. Only then can we hope to achieve something of the lavish Gospel kind ? the capacity to forgive even those who kill our loved ones or would kill us ? exhibited at Golgotha.

We recall Peter, who famously asked Jesus just how often should he forgive his brother anyway. (I suspect he had a specific brother in mind, Andrew, a thorn in Peter's side.) He asked: Should I forgive my brother seven times? (Matthew 18:21-35) Peter, no doubt, thought he was being generous. And part of me thinks seven times is indeed generous. Isn't that a little too much, a bit too emotionally exhausting?

But Jesus operates out of a deep well of love and compassion. ?Not seven times,? he said, ?but seventy times seven.?? It brings us up short, knocks the kilter out of our sense of the nature of things. But given the nature of Jesus' life, the life he calls us to, his capacity for forgiveness kept him on the path. All his days he was mocked, ridiculed, insulted, put under surveillance and now and again mobbed.

Yet in peace, equanimity and mindfulness he took to the Galilean countryside. There he healed and subverted. There he liberated hungry peasants from imperial powers hard as iron. He could move so peaceably because he could forgive. And when the underlings of the powers schemed to rid the earth of him, he naturally forgave them too.

Given such an example, the duty to relentlessly offer forgiveness falls to us ? forgiveness day and night. We are to forgive our parents and siblings, our relatives and neighbors, our classmates and teachers, our politicians and leaders, our presidents and generals, our popes and priests. Name anyone who churns up a dark cloud in your mental sky and forgive him. Forgiveness, like nonviolence, as a whole new way of life.

The injunction to forgive isn't willy-nilly. Just before the authorities haul Jesus away in Mark's version, he says to his disciples: ?When you stand to pray, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance, so that your heavenly God may in turn forgive you your transgressions.? (Mark 11:25) The forgiveness we receive hinges on the forgiveness we give. And more: the work of forgiveness goes on constantly. Forgive those who hurt you every time you pray!

As a priest conducting the sacrament of reconciliation, I often remind people of this basic law. ?God forgives you completely,? I say to our shared delight. Then I add: ?Now be sure to forgive likewise, to forgive everyone who ever hurt you.? Many are speechless as the connection dawns on them. Like two rivers converging, God's forgiving them joins with their forgiving others.

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Forgiveness in the end is eminently practical. It is a guidepost on the path to healing and peace. Resentment, wounds, grudges and hurts ? they burden only us. Rarely do they burden the ones who hurt us. Practically speaking, it is us forgiveness heals. Our souls are the ones deepened.

Who among us doesn't want that? But the question remains: how? Offense pains us and people can be cruel. Our memories are long; forgiveness doesn't come easy. How do we do it? Let me recommend three Lenten exercises.

The first is to write a list of every person who ever hurt you -- relatives and neighbors, co-workers and colleagues, church members and politicians. Beware, such a list can grow long. (My own, as recounted in my autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, grew to 75 entries before shame got the best of me and I put down

the pen.) Your list complete, write a formal prayer. Tell God that you forgive each one, you forgive them by name. Then ask the God of mercy to forgive you yourself. Do this every day during Lent.

Another exercise: imagine with all the vividness you can muster being in the presence of the compassionate Jesus. Add to the scene any person you just can't forgive. Tell Jesus the story of woe; tell him of the ineptitude, the injustice, the pain. Then watch how the nonviolent Jesus reacts. Such visualization can be disarming.

It has been commended by an activist friend of mine, a frequent visitor to the wrecked regions of Iraq, and having seen the suffering there, a growing hater of George W. Bush. Bush, of course, remains blissfully impervious to any activist's hatred, but as for my friend, the hatred was taking him under. And over the last few years he practiced this exercise. In his mind he sat with Jesus and to the scene he added his disagreeable visitor, George W. Bush. My friend reports his growing wonder as he watched Jesus respond, and then, a greater capacity to forgive on his part. Each time, he learned anew the scandalous heights of God's compassion.

So scandalous, in fact, as to inspire us to forgive even ourselves. Forgiving ourselves lies as well within the purview of forgiveness. It is our calling that we should forgive ourselves for all the ways we have hurt ourselves, not accepted ourselves, not loved ourselves as God loves us. Mercy toward ourselves unleashes mercy toward others.

It's a tall order, this business of forgiveness—not just because of our weakness but because of our culture. Ours is a culture of revenge and retaliation. The forgiveness the Amish community displayed some years ago when a gunman opened fire in a children's classroom, seldom finds the light of day in this so-called Christian nation.

But forgiveness is the path. Interpersonal forgiveness, communal forgiveness, even global forgiveness. Archbishop Tutu and South Africa set an example. By their Truth and Reconciliation Commission, they institutionalized forgiveness. Those who committed the atrocities of the apartheid era aired their murders and tortures publicly, a hard process which set fresh tears flowing. And only then could they appeal for amnesty.

I believe we need such a commission in the U.S.—perhaps many. One for starters to air the war crimes of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Rice. But many other commissions, too: one on the genocides against Native Americans; one on slavery and racism; one on poverty, healthcare, and homelessness; one on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; one on Vietnam; and one on all the dictators and fascist regimes we have supported, from Duvalier and Somoza to Marcos and the Shah.

We as a people must all look baldly at the truth and take responsibility. Only then can we repent, enact restorative justice, find social healing, forgive and be forgiven. Otherwise, we will continue to carry the burden of retaliation into future generations.

Sure, we can envision grand plans like this, but we still find it hard to let go of the simplest hurt. The smallest slight pushes us into fits of resentment that can last for decades. Yet imagine Jesus on the cross! From a lifetime of nonviolent practice, from every moment of his own prayer, from centered mindfulness and trust in a loving God, he was able to forgive his murderers and win resurrection. That was the strongest act of courage, bravery, and nonviolence ever, according to Cesar Chavez and Mahatma Gandhi. For you and me, he laid out a rose-strewn path toward a new world of nonviolence, justice and reconciliation.

Lent is a good time to ponder his words of forgiveness. Let's pray over them and imitate them, and make

Jesus? thrilling nonviolent saga of forgiveness our own.

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St. Anthony Messenger Press has just published, *John Dear On Peace: An Introduction to His Life and Work* by Patricia Normile. John also has two new books, *A Persistent Peace* (his autobiography, from Loyola Press), and *Put Down Your Sword*, (Eerdmans) a collection of essays on nonviolence, all available from www.amazon.com. On April 24-26, he will lead a weekend retreat on the lives and lessons of Gandhi, King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton at the Kirkridge retreat center in Stroudsburg, Pa.; see: www.kirkridge.org. For information about his books and speaking schedule, see: www.fatherjohndear.org.

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