

# Being Imperfect Together – 05-21-15

## An Essential Choice: Forgiveness or Resentment

Art Maines, LCSW

"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you."

~ Lewis B. Smedes

Forgiving is one of the hardest things we face in our relationships. People hurt us and make us angry with an array of thoughtless, rude behaviors. Sometimes they hurt us intentionally, either out of a desire for revenge or just to feel strong and powerful. How can we forgive them? Far too often, it seems, it's easier just to nurse a resentment out of the misplaced desire to "protect" ourselves or have something to hold over the other's head in a desperate bid for power.

Sometimes we can't or won't forgive, and sometimes perhaps we shouldn't, especially if that opens us up to dangerous abuse or other unsafe situations. Most of the time, however, we can end up cutting ourselves off from surprising healing available to us by choosing resentment over forgiveness. Far too many lives (and communities) have been ruined by resentment and bitterness than just about any other emotions.

In 2006 the Amish stunned the world with the way they chose to respond to the horrific massacre of 5 young girls in a small, rural schoolhouse. Eschewing the impulse for revenge and bitterness, instead they showed the world the power of grace and forgiveness in the face of a monstrous act by not only forgiving the gunman, but also by reaching out to his family and donating money to help them.

The Amish ability to forgive was rooted in their compassion: They recognized that the shooter was a deeply troubled, even mentally ill person. This is an extreme example that illustrates an essential truth in the practice of forgiveness, the ability to shift perspective and put ourselves, as much as we can, in the offender's shoes.

Thankfully, we are not likely to encounter someone as broken as the man in Pennsylvania, but we do encounter what I call our "everyday brokenness." All of us have had a difficult past in some way, and this pain and confusion we carry can insert itself into an interaction before we even realize it. Have a hard time with the "control freak" at church? Maybe that person carries the pain of a chaotic and unstable childhood, one in which the only certainty was the one he or she created and guarded with terrible ferocity. Compassion helps us see the person as hurting, sad, or confused rather than stupid, crazy, or mean. Compassion can also prevent the all-too-common impulse in a church community to run away rather than work it out.

Here's a challenge for you:

Reflect on who in your life, perhaps especially in our community here at Sts. Clare & Francis, do you have the hardest time with? Who has hurt you and perhaps made you want to leave the community that has meant so much to you? What would you need to be able to dialogue with

them in the spirit of reconciliation? Can you imagine them as a person who is hurting from old wounds? If it were possible that working things out with them could deepen your connection to God, would you do it?

*Art Maines, LCSW is a graduate of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. He has over 15 years of experience as a counselor and psychotherapist. One of his specialties is relationship improvement and communication coaching.*

© Art Maines, LCSW, 2015