

A few weeks ago I gave a talk to our Becoming Catholic group.

These are individuals who've been learning about the faith since September and will become Catholics at Easter.

My talk was on the Sacrament of Reconciliation, also called confession or penance.

Now, this is something I do each year, but I'll be honest, it's always a bit of a challenge to explain confession to those who aren't Catholic.

To outsiders it can seem like a really strange thing: going into a small room and telling your sins to a priest, who does that? Hardly anybody, except Catholics.

What was really fascinating was when our discussion turned to the topic of forgiveness.

One person asked, *"How do you forgive someone who has hurt you? How do you move past the pain and anger so you can heal?"*

Wow. Powerful questions.

We all struggle with forgiveness.

And we all need reconciliation and healing.

As long as humans have existed, forgiving others has been a challenge.

Today's readings gave us some strong instructions on just how important it is to forgive.

In the first reading today from the Old Testament,

God was laying down the law.

Here's one thing he instructed Moses to tell His Chosen People:

**SCREEN:** "You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart.

Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen,

do not incur sin because of him.

Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

If you ask the average person,

*'who said this last line about loving your neighbor?'*,

they'd say, 'Jesus'.

But this was written 1200 years before Jesus was born.

So loving and forgiving those who hurt you was an important part of the Jewish faith long before Jesus.

But it is something people need to hear over and over because it's easy to forget.

Which is why Jesus repeated it in the Gospel we just heard.

He quoted the passage from Moses but then took it one step further.

Here's what Jesus taught:

**SCREEN:** "You have heard that it was said,

***You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.***

**But I say to you, love your enemies**

**and pray for those who persecute you,**

**that you may be children of your heavenly Father"**

So forgiveness is also a core belief for followers of Jesus.

God loves and forgives us and says we must love and forgive others.

Why does God forgive us over and over and over?

The simple answer is God loves us and loves us in a way that few people truly love.

God's love for us is unconditional and eternal.

God will never ever stop loving us....never ever....

no matter what we do or how often we do it.

And if we want proof that this is true, we just have to see what happened after Moses gave the Law to God's Chosen People.

They turned away from God - from the very God who freed them from slavery in Egypt,

parted the Red Sea so they could escape,  
fed them in the desert and brought them into the Promised Land.

That's the god they turned away from!

God could have turned away from them, could have destroyed them,  
but God didn't.

Instead God loved them unconditionally and eternally.

Nothing they did could make God stop loving them.

If only they could grasp the true depths of God's love for them,  
they would never turn away.

But time and again they did....and God still loved and forgave them  
and welcomed them back.

That's what a parent does, isn't it?

And God said to them, "*now love the same way when someone hurts you.*"

Love unconditionally, love eternally, keep forgiving...and  
*take no revenge....cherish no grudge.*

Notice there is no wiggle room here.

God didn't say, "*It's okay to be a little bit vengeful towards  
the family member who hurt you*" OR

*"It's okay to hold a little grudge against that coworker or classmate or neighbor."*

Take NO revenge....cherish NO grudge.

Why?

Because God who created us knows how we are wired.

And God our creator knows that the vengefulness and the grudges hurt us.

They eat away at us inside.

They rob our peace of mind, our sense of calm and peace,

and they keep us from our purpose in life which is

loving God and others as we love ourselves.

One spiritual write says this about the power of forgiveness:

**SCREEN:** Forgiveness is setting a prisoner free and discovering

**the prisoner was you.**

Let me repeat that: *forgiveness is setting a prisoner free and discovering the prisoner was you.*

Jesus understood this when he said 'love your enemies'.

So often the person that someone considers an enemy was once a loved one or someone close.

Jesus wants his followers to love everyone and forgive everyone... again and again.

Why? Because it's how God loves us.

We can't presume upon God's mercy then withhold it from others.

Think of the line in the Lord's Prayer:

**SCREEN: forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.**

The two go together.

Flowing from God's forgiveness must be our forgiveness of those who've hurt us.

So to return to those questions from the Becoming Catholic group I met with, how do you forgive someone who has hurt you?

How do you let go of a hurt or a grudge and heal?

Jesus tells us that one important tool is prayer.

Pray for the person who has hurt you.

One parishioner told me that when he's struggling with a coworker, he prays for that person for 21 days straight.

21 days in a row!

He says, not only does it soften his heart, it also has an effect on the person.

It's nearly impossible to be vengeful or hateful if you are sincerely praying for the person.

And when you pray, ask God to help you see clearly why you are so hurt.

In other words, do a reality check.

How much of the hurt and source of your grudge is real and how much is in your head?

Is it possible that you blew things out of proportion?

Could you be making a bigger deal about something than you should be?

Might you be assigning motives or intents that just aren't there?

Do a reality check.

So that's one way to forgive as Jesus calls you to: pray.

Another important way is to find something positive in the person who has hurt you.

If all you focus on is the negative- on the hurt - you will never move beyond it.

Parents are told they should give two compliments for every criticism of their child.

Even when someone has hurt you, they aren't all bad.

And let's be honest, none of us are perfect; we all have imperfections and sins, we are all a little bit broken.

It's good to remember that when you think of others.

There is always something good to focus on. Always.

Many times when I give a penance to a person and their confession was mostly about their family, I'll say,

*'spend a moment in church and in your own words, give thanks to God for your family, for your spouse.'*

It changes the focus.

You're not stewing over what they did, you're praying for their good.

And in those moments of prayer you are letting go of the hurt and moving on to true reconciliation, true healing and true peace.

So how do you practice the love and forgiveness God asks of you?

Pray, do a reality check and focus on the positive.

To end this message today,

I want to share with you a quote from Pope Francis.

In one of his Masses this past week, he said this:

**SCREEN:** Every one of us has something that has hardened within our heart.

**The medicine to combat hardheartedness is memory:**

**recalling the blessings of the Lord. -Pope Francis**

*Recall the blessings of the Lord.*

And what is the greatest blessing?

That God loves us unconditionally and eternally and forgives us over and over.

That's the greatest blessing and the greatest medicine imaginable.

This coming week we begin the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday.

In Lent, we ask for God's help to remove anything in our lives that keeps us from loving Him and others more deeply.

One important spiritual tool we have as Catholics is the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

We will talk more about this in our upcoming Lenten message series.

But I would say this: if you are struggling to forgive someone who has hurt you, why not start by taking it to God?

Give your own brokenness and shortcoming to the Lord and let God's grace fill you.

When you experience God's forgiveness for you in the sacrament of Reconciliation it is easier to extend that same grace and forgiveness to someone else.

Today and this week, reflect on your relationship with God and others.

And as you reflect, always remember the blessings of the Lord.

May God's forgiveness, reconciliation and healing help you to extend greater mercy and true love to others. Amen. +