Reflections on RECONCILIATION

From: Bread for the Journey Fr. Henri Nouwen

RECEIVING FORGIVENESS

There are two sides of forgiveness: giving and receiving. Although at first sight, giving seems to be harder, it often appears that we are not able to offer forgiveness to others because we have not been able fully to receive it. Only as people who have accepted forgiveness can we find the inner freedom to give it. Why is receiving forgiveness so difficult? It is very hard to say, “Without your forgiveness I am still bound to what happened between us. Only you can set me free.” That requires not only a confession that we have hurt somebody but also the humility to acknowledge our dependency on others. Only when we can receive forgiveness can we give it.

FORGIVENESS, THE WAY TO FREEDOM

To forgive another person from the heart is an act of liberation. We set that person free from the negative bonds that exist between us. We say, “I no longer hold your offense against you.” But there is more. We also free ourselves from the burden of being the “offended one.” As long as we do not forgive those who have wounded us, we carry them with us or, worse, pull them as a heavy load. The great temptation is to cling in anger to our enemies and then define ourselves as being offended and wounded by them. Forgiveness, therefore, liberates not only the other but ourselves. It is the way to the freedom of the children of God.

Healing our Hearts through Forgiveness

How can we forgive those who do not want to be forgiven? Our deepest desire is that the forgiveness we offer will be what received. This mutuality between giving and receiving is what creates peace and harmony. But if our condition for giving forgiveness is that it will be received, we seldom will forgive! Forgiving the other is first and foremost an inner movement. It is an act that removes anger, bitterness and the desire for revenge from our hearts and helps us to reclaim our human dignity. We cannot force those we want to forgive into accepting our forgiveness. They might not be able to or willing to do so. They may not even know or feel that they have wounded us. The only people we can really change are ourselves. Forgiving others is first and foremost healing our own hearts.
Forgiving in the Name of God

We are all wounded people. Who wounds us? Often those whom we love and those who love us. When we feel rejected, abandoned, abused, manipulated, or violated. It is mostly by people very close to us: our parents, our friends, our spouses, our lovers, our children, our neighbors, our teachers, our pastors. Those who love us wound us too. That’s the tragedy of our lives. This is what makes forgiveness from the heart so difficult. It is precisely our hearts that are wounded. We cry out, “You, who I expected to be there for me, you have abandoned me. How can I ever forgive you for that?”

Forgiveness often seems impossible, but nothing is impossible for God. The God who lives within us will give us the grace to go beyond our wounded selves and say, “In the Name of god you are forgiven.” Let’s pray for that grace.

Healing Our Memories

Forgiving does not mean forgetting. When we forgive a person, the memory of the wound might stay with us for a long time, even throughout our lives. Sometimes we carry the memory in our bodies as a visible sign. But forgiveness changes the way we remember. It converts the curse into a blessing. When we forgive our parents for their divorce, our children for their lack of attention, our friends for their unfaithfulness in crisis, our doctors for their ill advice, we no longer have to experience ourselves as the victims of events we had no control over.

Forgiveness allows us to claim our own power and not let these events destroy us; it enables them to become events that deepen the wisdom of our hearts. Forgiveness indeed heals memories.

Forgiveness, the Cement of Community Life

Community is not possible without the willingness to forgive one another “seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22). Forgiveness is the cement of community life. Forgiveness holds us together through good and bad times, and it allows us to grow in mutual love.

But what is there to forgive or to ask forgiveness for? As people who have hearts that long for perfect love, we have to forgive one another for not being able to give or receive that perfect love in our everyday lives. Our many needs constantly interfere with our desire to be there for the other unconditionally. Our love is always limited by spoken or unspoken conditions. What needs to be forgiven? We need to forgive one another for not being God!