

When Forgiveness is Hard

An Intergenerational Discussion

(Please note: The topics discussed here may be too intense for younger children. Parental discretion is advised.)

Gather and Pray

“The Prayer of St. Frances”

Each person sings or prays one line of the prayer.

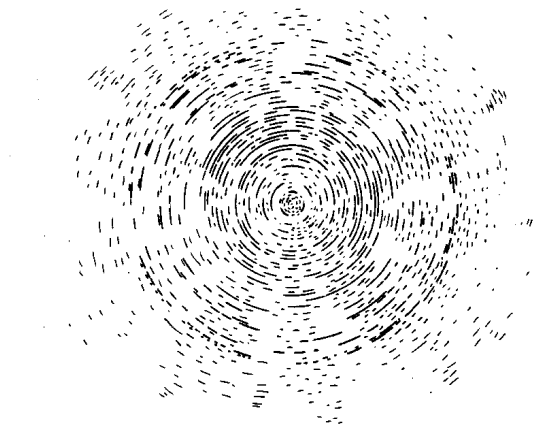
Then, all pray the prayer again in unison.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:21-35

- *How many times should I forgive?*

Reflect and discuss:

1. Why might the servant who was forgiven have refused forgiveness to others?
2. What does it mean to “forgive from the heart?”
3. Why is it sometimes hard to forgive?



Reader: A story from *The Hiding Place*, by Corrie ten Boom

Corrie, a Dutch Christian woman, was 50 years old when the Nazis invaded Holland. In her book, she tells how she and her family hid Jewish neighbors in a secret room while they waited to escape through the underground network. Ultimately, Corrie and her family were arrested and imprisoned. Her 84-year-old father died within a few days. Corrie and her sister, Betsie, were sent to Ravensbruck, a concentration camp where 96,000 women eventually died amid incredible suffering. Betsie kept urging her sister to forgive their tormentors. After 10 months, Betsie died.

A month later, due to a clerical error, Corrie was released and managed to return home, sick and emaciated. Inspired by her sister’s courage in prison, she opened a house where people damaged in spirit by the war could recuperate before rejoining society. She began a speaking tour of reconciliation across Europe, convinced that the key to healing the wounds of war was to forgive those who had committed such terrible crimes.

Corrie’s test came after a speech in Munich, when a man approached her. “How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein; to think that, as you say, he has washed my sins away.” He proceeded to tell her that during the war, he was a Nazi. He thrust out his hand to shake Corrie’s. Stunned, she could not raise her hand. She knew him: he was one of the brutal guards from Ravensbruck. Here she was, the apostle of forgiveness, and she could not make herself forgive. All she could do was pray, “Lord Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Forgive me and help me to forgive him.” Her hand came up to meet his (cf. *The Hiding Place*, p. 238).

Leader asks: “What does forgiveness look like?” (Children may come up with a variety of answers that may help you develop a greater insight into their understanding of this complex concept. There is no right or wrong answer. Guide them towards the conclusion that forgiveness is a process and that it may not happen right away.)

Leader explains:

Steps to forgiveness may include:

- Ask yourself: What is the problem?
- Decide if you are ready to say you are sorry or to accept the other person's apology.
- If you are ready, say "I'm sorry for ..." or, if the other person apologizes say, "I accept your apology."
- If you don't feel ready to forgive, you may need more time to think about what happened.
- Does the person appear to feel sorry for what they did? If not, it may be harder to forgive. In this case it may be a good idea to seek some advice from a helpful adult.

Observe and report without discussion:

1. Who or what really presses your anger buttons? How do you deal with it?
2. Give an example of forgiveness that has inspired you.
3. What do you think "turning the other cheek" means?
4. Remember a time when you found it hard to forgive.

Judge, in light of what Christ teaches us:

1. When is it acceptable not to forgive?
2. What effect does refusing to forgive have on a person?
3. How can I respond, inwardly and outwardly, when I have asked for forgiveness and been refused it?
4. What part does God play in forgiving?
5. How does the act of forgiveness give personal empowerment?
6. What can we do when it is hard to forgive?

Decide on an action you can take now:

1. Pray for a relationship that is broken to be healed, and invite the Lord to help you to reconcile.
2. With a trusted friend or counselor, practice voicing hurt feelings and releasing anger.
3. Write a letter to your parents (living or deceased), thanking them for the many times they have forgiven and supported you.
4. Learn more about responding to the needs of victims of injustice, violence or abuse.
5. Celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation.

Closing Prayer: The Lord's Prayer. *Share a sign of peace.*

Background for the Leader:

Forgiveness is the virtue of being able to reconcile, but forgiveness cannot be demanded or rushed. Some of the most sensitive issues of interpersonal trauma recovery concern the concept of forgiveness, a concept which is at the heart of Catholic tradition. For most trauma victims, however, forgiveness is one of the last issues with which they should deal. This includes children. Victims must have sufficient time and support from others so that their forgiveness is their forgiveness, and not the forced agenda of another. If pushed to forgive before they are truly ready, they may later find themselves in another faith crisis. Children are helped by learning that forgiveness is a process, and that several steps may need to occur before they are ready to forgive (such as talking about our feelings, trying to understand the other person's point of view, and accepting that we have been hurt).