

“Don’t
you dare
forgive.
Unless...”

FINDING WHAT YOU
MOST DEEPLY WANT

Fr. Joe Kempf



TWENTY-THIRD
PUBLICATIONS

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*As I walked out the
door toward the gate
that would lead to my freedom,
I knew if I didn't leave
my bitterness and hatred behind,
I'd still be in prison.*

NELSON MANDELA

INTRODUCTION

When the priest who tried to ruin my reputation and run me out of the parish went to jail, I knew that he could no longer hurt me or anyone else, at least for a while. There would come a day, I figured, when I would not cry as much. Sadly, however, I was afraid that I might never again feel the same joy for life I once did. That was what most broke my heart. To even think about forgiving at that time would not have made any sense.

Years have passed. Some of that pain will always be a part of me. Yet those wounds have little power over me now. I am so much more alive and free. Did forgiveness play a part?

Like you, I make my way through life as best as I can. Of course I've been hurt. No one ever said life would be fair. Sadly, I've also hurt people along the way.

Everyone suffers at the hands of others. Sometimes, the damage is awful. Why do so many people tell us it

is important to forgive? What does that even mean? Are there steps to take to become more free? Does the pain ever get better?

From my vantage point as priest, I often see the wounds people carry. At the same time, I am often blessed to see folks who choose important and beautiful ways to deal with their pain. Watching that kind of goodness unfold is one of my life’s greatest joys.

And so I offer these short essays, with a few stories, a few suggestions, a few thoughts on the way.

Clearly, I am not a scholar. In my heart, I am a pastor. It is from that perspective that I write: as family member and friend, as sinner and saint, as someone so much more like you than not.

Fr. Joe

Seriously. Don't.

*My heart was broken and my head
was just barely inhabitable.*

ANNE LAMOTT

To this day, I don't know why the new pastor consistently lied about me or needed people to hate me. Nor did I have any explanation for why he kept changing locks in the rectory to give me less and less access in my own home. It was, however, when I saw him spit in my food when he thought no one was looking that I knew I would have to ask to be transferred.

Before I could do anything with that thought, I received a late-night phone call from a distraught parishioner. Evidently, at a small social gathering, this pastor put his hands down the pants of a thirteen-year-old boy.

Within the week, the archbishop removed the priest from the parish and asked me to say nothing during the period of investigation. That weekend, the pastor announced at all the Masses that he would be leaving the parish. To his circle of power in the parish he blamed his leaving on me. Between Masses, a number

of people screamed at me for “what I had done to that poor man.”

After the last Mass, I locked up the church and, exhausted, closed the rectory door behind me. For a while, I just stood there, leaning with my back against the door, trying to stop shaking.

Who knows how long I stood like that? The ring of the doorbell startled me, and I did not know if I should answer it. When I did, I opened the door to a woman who showed me a picture of marks on the face of her son. She said they were made by that pastor who had hit her child while he was serving Mass. Shortly after that, the doorbell rang again, this time by a man also angry at the harm this priest had done to one of his kids. Me? I mostly just wanted to cry. That is, until someone told me, “You just need to forgive.” That is when I just wanted to scream.

No, I did NOT just need to forgive. What would that even mean? Why would anyone even think that was a good thing to say right then? At that moment, the suggestion that I should forgive felt like even more violence. Because it was.

No one has to tell you how you’ve been wronged. Maybe it’s a small thing that still eats on you. Or perhaps the offenses were awful. Maybe just hearing that person’s name gives you a pit in the stomach. Perhaps your anger wakes you in the middle of the night.

How many times do you or I replay that conversation or relive that scene? Often, many of us get angry at

ourselves for not handling the situation differently. We wonder which parts might have been our own fault. For some, the hurt is shoved in our faces again each time we open the door, with every approaching holiday, or perhaps with each breath.

There is often a part of us that does not want to forget. Or, if we try to forget, even when we shove the memory of the pain as far down inside us as we can, there is usually some part of us that still knows it's there. For these offenses also touch into our core wounds.

Often our bodies also carry the effects of the hurts. There is data that shows the negative consequences of trauma and anger to our health—when we know it, and when we don't.

What do we do with all of our pain and hurt? Perhaps it is easier to say what *not* to do. One of the first things is to avoid telling ourselves we are not angry when we are. There is wisdom to this insight: “What we don't deal with will deal with us.”

A friend of mine once told me: “I hated my uncle. He was a sexual molester. My grandmother kept him at bay, but the damage was done. I once heard myself say, ‘I wouldn't care if a train hit him and drug him for miles down the track. I might even cheer it on.’ I was told that perhaps I should work on forgiveness.”

My thought for her? Yes, but perhaps not yet.

Though I want my friend to know the freedom and healing that come from forgiveness, we are often much too glib about what that means.

Unless...

*I've had a few arguments with people,
but I never carry a grudge. You know why?
While you're carrying a grudge,
they're out dancing.* **BUDDY HACKETT**

Jesus told amazing stories. One of his best-known begins this way:

A man has two sons. The younger of them says to his father, "Father, give me the share of the estate that is coming to me." So the father divides up the property. Some days later this younger son collects all his belongings and goes off to a distant land, where he squanders his money on dissolute living.

If you do not know this story it is well worth reading. It is often called the story of "The Prodigal Son" and appears in the middle of Luke's gospel (Luke 15:11-32). In this two-part story Jesus gives us some of the clearest insight into his own heart.

Jesus invites us to meet a God more wonderful than we had ever imagined, a God of truly unconditional forgiveness and extravagant love. I've long thought that if

we could only know one story about God and we knew this story, it would be enough.

Jesus makes one thing very clear: we do not have enough power to make God stop loving us. No matter how badly we've messed up, God is always inviting us home, waiting to welcome us again into loving arms. *This* is the God of Jesus.

Then, after this stunning story of a dad's astonishing love, Jesus turns us dramatically to the older brother. In the story of the prodigal son, it is pretty obvious that the prodigal son is lost. It is just as true that—in his anger—the elder brother is also lost.

And because the father loves this son just as much, he invites him home also, asking him to move beyond his hurt and anger at his younger brother. This too is the God of Jesus.

Many Scripture scholars tell us that forgiveness is the heart of the gospel, the clearest summary of the message of Jesus. We see Jesus forgive, and we hear his clarion call that we do the same.

Why is forgiveness so important to Jesus? It's simple: Jesus loves us so much that he wants us to be free! Jesus knows that if we want a joy-filled life, we have to take this road-less-traveled and do the hard work of forgiving.

And if we don't?

Some years ago, a man I know buried his daughter, the victim of a drunken driver who swerved into her lane and killed her. Several weeks after the funeral, we talked about what it felt like for him to try to go through life

without his daughter, taken from him in such a senseless act.

He talked about how food tasted like sawdust, how it broke his heart to watch his other family members grieve, and how lonely it was to watch the rest of the world go on as if nothing had happened. At one point he said, “This all seems like a dream, and I can hardly imagine my life without her.” He put his head down for a while, and I wasn’t sure what he was thinking. Then he looked up at me and said, “I will have anger, but I will not have hatred.” He said, “If I have hatred in my heart, that senseless act of violence claims another victim.”

“If I have hatred in my heart, that senseless act of violence claims another victim.” This heartbroken man knows a profound truth. There is a price to pay for *not* forgiving. The smoldering anger of non-forgiveness will cause great harm, whether we are aware of it or not.

Jesus knows we have all been wronged: Each of us—in small ways or in big ways—has been treated unfairly, taken advantage of, or harmed by some injustice. What we choose to do with those wrongs will profoundly affect the kind of person we are, the kind of life we have.

Most simply: forgiveness is not optional for those who want a joy-filled, meaningful life. Forgiveness is essential to our souls; it is the heart of truly holy and happy living. To *not* forgive has been well described as like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. The rat will be just fine, but we won’t. Some part of us dies.

We could try revenge, repression, or resentment, but only forgiveness breaks us open to a life of joy.

Through his life and even in his death, Jesus proclaimed that forgiveness is the path to life. I believe that all the holy women, children, and men who love us and have gone before us in death would also tell us that the work of forgiveness is worth it.

For when we forgive, we are not losing. We are setting ourselves free.

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Publications

What forgiveness is *not*

*Hope has two beautiful daughters;
their names are Anger and Courage.
Anger at the way things are,
and courage to ensure that
they do not remain as they are.*

SAINT AUGUSTINE

Recently, the daughter of one of our parishioners was shot to death while shopping at a religious goods store. When the police captured his daughter's murderer several days later, this parishioner told me how relieved he was.

This humble, good man said to me: "Quite honestly, Fr. Joe, I hope the man never gets out of prison because, if he does, my boys would probably want to kill him. Then I'd lose my sons as well." He added, "I don't expect them to forgive that man. Instead, I've been working with them to help them transition to something more positive."

"I don't expect them to forgive that man, but to transition to something more positive." That is precisely the stuff of forgiveness.

I wish we had a different word than *forgiveness*. Sadly, the word is a stumbling block for many because it has become laden with so many levels of misunderstanding. “Transitioning to something more positive” is a clumsy phrase, but it is a good description of the key energy that forgiveness is all about.

Too many people operate from the misconception that forgiveness means acting like no wrong was done. They fear that forgiveness implies that we are excusing the other’s behavior, that we are somehow saying it was okay. No. If that’s what forgiveness meant, of course we wouldn’t forgive! Even if there might be extenuating circumstances, forgiveness does not mean we condone the wrong that was done to us or others.

A different misunderstanding about forgiveness is the fear that it means we have to remain in situations where we will be wronged again and again. No! We are not meant to live in abusive environments. Sometimes, abusers will use Jesus’ call to forgiveness as a way to manipulate a vulnerable person into staying under their power. No! Sometimes, forgiveness means we need to step away from another.

It is also a delusion to think that revenge will help us on the path. Revenge is a false light; there is no life there. The death penalty is often the extreme example of our desire for revenge. The death penalty has been shown not to be a deterrent; it seems more to be a way for people to try to get some sort of satisfaction for the wrong done to them. But it does not appear to do that, either. The reac-

tions of persons who watch the execution of those who killed their loved ones seems most commonly to be that it was “not enough.” The death of the murderer did not quench their hurt. Something inside of ourselves dies when we seek revenge. Forgiveness includes working to willingly give up our desire for revenge.

It was maybe a year or so after that priest I had lived with went to jail that I decided to bring all that was inside me to the Sacrament of Reconciliation (often called Confession). This sacrament can be a healing place to take our sin and our brokenness, and I wanted to bring whatever was sinful on my part in all of this and to ask for the healing I needed.

When I told the priest, “For whatever was sinful about my anger, I am sorry,” I heard myself quickly add, “but I am not sorry for most of that anger.” Nor should I have been. For it was my anger, in part, that helped me do what was needed to stand up to this man so that less damage would be done. What he did was *not* okay.