

There's this fella I used to know; he was in his sixties and had had a fairly easy go of things. I'm sure he would say "nobody knows the troubles I've seen." But if his silver spoon was tarnished, it was his own doing. There was something about this guy that made him immensely unpleasant to be around. I was on the receiving end of several of his red-faced, full chested rants. Folks said he did that to everybody. I never could figure out why they were so quick to excuse him, but he always got away with his hollering. The more I learned of his story the less convinced I was that there was good reason for his rage. I think he was just spoiled. He was the kind of guy that expected his wife to do all the things his mother did for him. But as soon as someone told him no, he became a 250-pound walking tantrum.

Now, obviously, this wasn't great. Every time he thought someone crossed him, he got mad. And he thought someone crossed him a lot. No one wanted to be around him. He was so volatile, you never knew what landmine hid beneath the surface, but you knew there were landmines. So you'd hold him at arm's length, and it was generally accepted that arm's length wasn't far enough. And that's the tragedy of this guy. He was so miserable to be around that his volatility pushed people away. And as people stepped away, he'd get his feelings hurt and blow up again, which pushed more people away until there was no one left to push. Yes, he did it to himself. And yes, everyone was kinda happy to let him distance himself. It sure was quieter that way. If you were one of the few left on his side, you'd never defend him. You'd just sigh and say that's who he is, knowing that was both no excuse and all the explanation in the world.

I did learn about one of his real hurts. By that time, it was fifteen years in the past. But to hear this guy tell it, the wound was as fresh as this morning's coffee. For fifteen years, that one moment ate at him and he got sourer and more miserable. As much as I didn't enjoy spending time with the fella, even I could see how bad things had become. He really was hard to be around, but the tragedy was still there. His was the clearest case of "bless his heart" I've ever seen. Here's the thing: I don't know how else things could've played out. There were too many defense mechanisms between me and his story. But what I knew just made me sad for him. He didn't know how to react to adversity, even small stuff. So he did what worked as a kid and never grew out of it.

One day, he came to see me, and from the moment he pulled up, I could tell something was wrong. Instead of screeching to a halt, slamming the door, and storming into the building, he parked slowly, leaned out of the car, and slumped his way inside. He'd been to see the doctor and got some bad news. His blood pressure was off-the-charts high. No surprise, given his tendency toward explosion. What was a surprise was how he took the news. He didn't holler at the nurse or the blood pressure sleeve. The solid footing beneath him became slippery and unpredictable, and all his energy left that red face knowing that something needed to change. He plopped down and relayed what his doctor said. "If you don't start taking some deep breaths and ease up, you're gonna have a heart attack. Being so mad all the time's gonna kill you." He looked me in the eye and said, "am I really that bad?" Y'all, it's a good thing I've got a compassion filter on my better days, 'cause I almost guffawed. It was so obvious to the rest of us that I never imagined he didn't know. He never imagined he had something to do with his own exile. It took a doctor telling him to get him to listen. I wish I had a tidy way to wrap up this story. I wish I could tell ya that we went and sat in the church, he shared his many wrongs, repented in tears, and became that parish's Miss Congeniality. But I can't. I left before there was any kind of resolution. But I didn't leave before he'd forgotten his doctor's orders and blew up again.

When we talk about forgiveness, there's a lot that comes together to make it such a weirdly compelling, graceful thing. But we also tend to think about it kinda wrong. You can ask for forgiveness all day long, and it's great if you say you're sorry and the person you wronged gives you a big ol' hug. But forgiveness is on the

other side, what do you do when you're the one wronged? (A quick sidebar: it's easy to use forgiveness as a way to make other people stick around nasty situations. Like, "if you really loved me, you'd forgive me." That's a twisted way of manipulating forgiveness into control. And it's wrong. That's not what we're talking about here.) But forgiveness does have an aspect of control to it. Being harmed takes power away from you. But forgiving can be a way to take that power back. When we refuse to forgive, or just can't bring ourselves to do it, the person who did us wrong stays on the top of our brains. Being wronged then becomes the nexus of our life, sometimes an obsession. We respond to everything from that place of hurt. And the one who hurt us maintains control. Whether we do what they want or swing clear in the other direction, we're still responding to them.

Now forgiveness is a beautiful thing to receive; I've felt that relief many times. But it's even more beautiful to offer. On the one hand, it sets relationships on the road to repair. But maybe more so, it frees you of the control someone else held. Forgiveness refuses to let someone else's hateful act influence what you do. To forgive requires nothing of anyone but you. And that means forgiveness frees you from anyone's control, even if you haven't seen them since that terrible day, even if they're ten years in the grave, even if they sit across the kitchen table every morning. It's an enormous decision and it takes a lot of work, but it can happen entirely in the privacy of your own soul.

Over the last few weeks, we've heard the line "whatever you loose on earth, you loose in heaven" a couple times. I can't think of a better description than loosing what binds us. It's not easy, but if you can do it, tension dissipates from fist to soul, and lightness floats into your heart. You always have the power to set loose whatever it is you carry. And while sometimes it feels kinda good to hold onto all that junk, it's not healthy. There's a million supposed reasons to keep that stuff bound, but none of 'em are worth it. They push us away from the love of community, and those old wrongs continue holding sway. We'll never be free from our wounds if those wounds define us. Let them go. They won't spread. They'll dissolve and you'll be free. Peter asks how many times we're supposed to do this, and Jesus says it's more than we can fathom. Today it's seventy seven times, another seventy times seven. But really it's endless. How often should we do this? Every single day. We can choose to hold on to the wrongs that bind us, or we can choose to let them flutter away. As the illustrious Jinx Monsoon would say, it's like water off a duck's back,

Now, I've been hurt in some real ways, and I've heard some of y'all's harrowing stories, too. I know what it's like to hold on tight to being wronged. It might feel kinda good for a minute, but refusing to forgive eventually becomes a kind of torture with forgiveness itself as the only relief. (A little therapy wouldn't hurt, either.) I want to be clear. Forgiving is not an endorsement of behavior. It's not an excuse from consequences. And it's not an invitation to get hurt all over again. It's setting loose the stuff that seeps into our souls and eats at us. Forgiveness recognizes that *someone* did wrong, but it refuses to let *their* mistake rule you. The world and all these people in it opens us up to plenty of opportunities for love and plenty of opportunities for harm.

But forgiveness isn't a free pass for them to take advantage of us. It's a way of exercising real, gentle power. It's a way of loving enemies who target us, of loving friends who stumble, of loving ourselves who can be so delicate. And it's a way of loving our neighbors. So, forgive and you will be set free. Loose your wrongs and your binds will fall. Be generous with your love, and you will know the grace of God.