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a card, a movie or another shared experience — something inserted into the frame of reference that allows us to relate to the other and to create a new opening for the future.

4. *To forgive* — to give, to pass on to others as God has done for us the grace we have been given, each act of forgiveness drawing us deeper into the gift of forgiveness that our God gives us in Jesus.

Throughout the entire process we must pray for the person we intend to and need to forgive. If we do not forgive we remain imprisoned in our own emotions, in the past and what we perceive as done to us, instead of living in the freedom of the children of God, able to pass on to others what has been given to us by God, not merely throwing back at them what we feel they have done to us. When we face injustice, sin, and evil we are never ever to “do unto others what they have done unto us.” We are to do unto others what God has done and is doing unto us. We are to live as people of the gift of forgiveness.

This is the first level of the gift. Each concrete act of forgiveness is aimed toward a second level that results in mutuality, called “reconciliation,” which in Greek means, “to walk together again.” In the most powerful of the gospels’ reconciliation stories, toward the end of the Gospel of John, the resurrected Jesus walks the beach with Peter. Jesus addresses him as “Simon, son of John,” his name and identity before they ever met. Peter, who betrayed Jesus three times, with ever more intensity and vehemence must assert his love three times to walk with Jesus again as his follower and friend. Forgiveness is a given. The real work begins with reconciliation, walking together again. Everything is forgivable and redeemable, but it is hard work to keep the community whole.

During times of persecution and martyrdom, many in the early church lived in fear that if arrested they might bow to the power of Rome and give up their faith, committing the sin of apostasy. Some who did betray the faith, however, often having turned other members of the community into the authorities as well, later wanted to come back.

6 Reconciliation and At-One-Ment: The Other Gifts of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is only the first of three levels of this gift from the Father, in Jesus’ Spirit. The journey to forgiveness itself can be long and arduous, or on rare occasions its levels can be experienced quickly, even simultaneously. Whether they transpire over time or happen all at once, a person seeking to forgive another must go through four steps.

1. *To forgo* — to forgo vengeance, name-calling, complaining, telling others about what has happened, bitter words and feelings, anger, retaliation—anything that would aggravate the situation further.
2. *To forbear* — to accept our share of the burden of forgiveness, bearing wrongs patiently, with equanimity, with good will and simple human courtesy, refusing to stack the deck against the other or connect the present situation to any past grievances.
3. *To forget* — to create new memories so that the next time we encounter the person his or her transgression or injustice toward you is not the first thing we remember or react to. We can do this by reaching out in concrete ways: a cup of coffee,

Some leaders refused to forgive apostates, but others did so in the name of the community. Christians condemned to torture and death in the public arena were imprisoned until it was time for their martyrdom. Those who sought to repent their apostasy could witness to their faith by asking those facing death to forgive them and to pray for them as they died. They knew that the faith of the martyrs, who they watched die gruesome deaths, reconciled them to the community. After the martyr was buried, the community welcomed the apostate back, forgiven because of the martyr's mercy. No sin is unforgivable. Members of the community (all of whom have been entrusted with the keys of forgiveness) can forgive and draw back into the sanctuary those who have sinned.

Just after telling Peter that to be a Christian he must forgive not seven times, but seventy-seven times — that is, without limit — Jesus pronounces a startling, seemingly harsh parable. It speaks of the “kingdom of heaven,” which means it deals with how we live now on earth in the kingdom and how we witness to the world the way in which the kingdom comes and abides among us. Some call it “the parable of the unforgiving debtor”:

That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children and all his property, in payment of the debt. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, “Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.” Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan. (Mt 18:23–28)

Because it is a parable, it starts off stating the obvious: a situation, circumstance, or problem familiar to those who hear the story. Then, out of nowhere, comes something totally unexpected, even preposterous — something that wouldn't or didn't happen in reality. The situation was familiar — a man in debt way over his means and unable to repay faced the usual consequence — being sold into slavery to satisfy

the debt. Such an event was common. But then the first surprise comes: the master has such pity on the servant that he drops the entire debt — which is massive. Some translations mention a specific amount, ten thousand talents. A talent was the largest denomination of gold currency, and he owes ten thousand! There would have been gasps all around. What kind of king is this? Jesus would have had their undivided attention:

When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, “Pay back what you owe.” Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, “Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.” But he refused. Instead, he had him put in prison until he paid back the debt. Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. (Mt 18:28–32)

The two scenarios are almost identical, except the levels of power and authority and the amount of debt have dropped drastically. The servant on the same level as the servant just freed from his enormous burden also begs mercy. But it seems the freed servant has a short memory and no gratitude for what his master, the king, has done for him. He will not follow the king's lead on how to live with others. Instead he imposes what a king usually would have done to him, destroying a fellow servant's life (as well as his family's). This, in many ways, resembles what happens in the world. What goes around doesn't necessarily come around — we learn slowly, especially in regard to gratitude. Again, however, the parable presents something surprising and startling: now the other servants are the ones deeply distressed. Having seen and come to know their king in his graciousness to the indebted servant, they want him to know what has happened — their ungrateful fellow servant did not pass along the king's gift. He took for granted what he had received and insulted the king's magnanimity. The freed servant may not have changed his behavior because of what has been granted him, but the other servants will not let his injustice to another go unnoticed:

His master summoned him and said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?" Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart. (Mt 18:33-35)

This is the third and the most unnerving aspect of the parable — something none of us want to hear or accept as the Word of Jesus. The servant is summoned and made to answer for his own actions and his wrongdoing after the king's generosity to him. God treats us with mercy and pity; we are to learn to imitate our God and treat one another likewise. If we accept the gift of forgiveness then we must proffer that same gift to all others, or else — or else justice requires that we be treated just as we treat others. As horrifying and dismaying as it may be, this is the truth. We are always forgiven and we are often quick to take the gift, but how often do we not give that gift to others? We persist in our stingy, self-righteous, demanding, and violent dealings with others, even after we have known such incredible graciousness from our God. This judgment upon the servant who does not heed and reciprocate what he himself has experienced from the king echoes Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount:

Stop judging, that you may not be judged. For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you. Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eyes? How can you say to your brother, "Let me remove that splinter from your eye," while the wooden beam is in your eye? You hypocrite, remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother's eye. (Mt 7:1-5)

In all our dealings with others we must reflect how God knows each of us and never fails to shower us with forgiveness. We must share forgiveness among ourselves as lavishly as God has given it to us. If

not, we will receive the same justice we have done unto others. If we refuse to forgive others, we will be held accountable. This is what this sobering parable, the Word of God, exhorts. Jesus warns that we must forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts.

In the early church every sin, no matter how grave, could be forgiven and the forgiven sinner drawn back into the community — reconciled. The very early church thought that one didn't sin after baptism! That error was soon realized and so all the baptized came to practice the three disciplines that Jesus preached in his first sermon: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Through them, along with celebration and reception of the Eucharist, sins of the baptized were forgiven. Breaking the word and breaking the bread in community brought about the forgiveness of the sins of the community.

Reconciliation is founded upon the practice of almsgiving and its function both in forgiving sin and in determining how we ourselves view sinners who need to be forgiven. Our communities have always shunned certain factions or individuals because they are considered sinners. A Jewish story can serve to caution us when we are tempted to make judgments about sin and sinners, and when we wonder whether everyone in our community deserves our forgiveness. It is called "Yossele the Miser."

* Once a very rich man, Yossele, was considered a stingy, mean miser. Everyone was sure that he shared his wealth with no one, never gave to anyone — ever. Everyone in the ghetto where he lived knew how much he had and how he hoarded it, and everyone judged him for not doing something to help the suffering and need of the women and the children and the elderly. But he never made public donations. They thought he was hard-hearted, and they hated him for it. They talked about him and his stinginess and prayed that God, blest be His Name, would remember his meanness. The children feared him and threw stones at him when he walked in the street. Yossele, like everyone else, eventually got old and sick. The word spread that he was finally nearing the end. Before he died the community burial society went to him and asked for the ritual gift of a thou-

sand rubles for the poor. He turned his head to the wall, refusing even to speak with them. So they left him and he died alone.

After his death they searched his big house, but could find no money at all, and so they buried him outside the community in an unmarked paupers' grave, a fitting end, they thought, for a man who had not recognized the poor while he lived.

But then disturbing changes began to surface. Just before the Sabbath, the community leaders started approaching the rabbi for money to be given to poor women and children and old people. He gave them what he could, when he could. But he asked them, "What did you do before? Why are you asking me now? You never did previously." The rabbi began making inquiries. To his horror he found that every week before the Sabbath Yossele had been secretly giving to the poor so that they did not have to beg from the leaders or the rabbi. And he had given so that no one, not even those who received his generosity, would know.

The rabbi was distressed. Yossele had been the holiest of them of all and now they didn't even know where he was buried. They had treated him so vilely — doing to him what they had accused him of, blaming him for what really was their own shallow judgment and smallness of mind and heart. The rabbi gathered the whole community and decreed that they must fast and do penance for what they had done to Yossele while he was alive and for how they had dishonored him in death. They must ask Yossele to forgive them their mean-spiritedness — and they must ask for some sign that they were forgiven. They all set to it with fervor.

After fasting for some time, the rabbi fell into a trance. And behold in a vision he saw Yossele in the Garden of Eden surrounded by the righteous. Yossele told him, "Tell the people to stop fasting and doing penance and to go home and live with each other. I have forgiven them. I forgave them every day for what they did and what they thought of me. You see, long ago I asked God, blest be His Name, for a favor. I wanted the honor and the privilege of giving to others the way God gives, without anyone's knowledge and without

requiring anyone's thanks. I wanted them to be so thankful that they in turn would give out of their bounty to others also in need." The rabbi was stunned. When he told the people what he had seen and heard they were speechless. What did they know? There was so much to learn. So much to change!

The story warns us all to be careful in judging others and to practice reconciliation. As individuals and as church we must first look to ourselves and take care about how we approach others, judge others, and treat others.

The early church considered "sin" to mean "missing the mark," this mark being to aim at the practice of true worship, faithfulness and obedience to the Word of Jesus. Over its first three hundred years a "Rite of Penitents" developed by which members whose sin was so grievous that it had affected the whole community could be reconciled. Only certain sins were considered so destructive that a sinner must enroll in this Rite to be brought back into communion. These sins, which affected the community's own sense of itself and made it harder for the rest of the church to believe and practice, included offenses such as apostasy, violence toward others, adultery, fornication, refusal to forgive, greediness and hoarding, and failure to put the gifts of the Spirit at the service of the community.

The Rite of Penitents itself followed a simple process of forgiveness and reconciliation: acknowledgement of guilt, spoken request for forgiveness, conversion of one's life and restitution, penance in the form of a positive action to correct the previous sinful behavior or attitude, and thanking for the goodness and mercy of God who is Forgiveness and Mercy in Jesus.

Subsequent chapters of Matthew's Gospel deal with specific categories of sin: unfaithfulness in marriage and all relationships; the misuse of money and the danger of riches; and the negative effects on the community of personal sin such as scandal, discouragement, and despair. Leaders' sins caused further problems, because their hypocrisy devastated the spirit of the community. The church suffered from external tensions and pressures imposed on it by the Roman Empire and the Jewish leaders. Far worse, however, was the tension and despair within the community caused by believers who mistreated one

another despite their baptism and their sharing the Word and the Bread of life. The prophetic ideal of the gospel was livable — Jesus' words could be obeyed and lived.

The power of the Spirit never left the community. Certain "marks" or behaviors characterized the life of a believer. Echoing the Ten Commandments, there were ten such marks:

1. *Forgive* everyone, everything, always, seventy times seven times. "Stop counting and start forgiving" is a way of life for the children of God.
2. *Love one another as I have loved you* — Love even unto death. What you believe may cost your life. Believing in and practicing love has no limit.
3. *Love your enemies* — *do no harm to anyone* — Respond to evil, sin and injustice without violence. Do good to others, bless those who curse you, return goodness for evil.
4. *There are to be no poor among you* — Give to all who beg from you. Share your excess and practice the virtue of poverty. "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40).
5. *Deny yourself* so that you do not deny Jesus. Offer your sufferings for the healing of nations and for others. Pick up your cross and follow Jesus.
6. *Bear one another's burdens* and seek to relieve all human misery. Practice the corporal works of mercy.
7. *Be truthful* and live with integrity of word, practice, thought, and public witness.
8. *Be the Good News of God for the poor*. Heal, feed, welcome all to community, provide sanctuary, and accept everyone as the Body of Christ.
9. *Alone for evil*, your own, others', the church's, and the world's. This means at-one-ment, keeping the community at one as well as doing restoration and working for justice in the world.

10. *In everything, in every situation, in every relationship, remember*: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). This is the defining concept in all decisions and practice, and it is worded in the plural — Jesus came not just for individuals, but for groups, for all peoples.

These marks of the Christian describe the pattern of life that all are called to in baptism. And all fail, often and miserably, at living up to baptismal vows. Relating to sinners (that is, all of us) is always the tension between teaching and preaching the prophetic truth of who we are as the beloved children of God and the pastoral response to the fact that we fail continually. We are forgiven sinners.

The third level of forgiveness is at-one-ment, the communion of the believers that is preserved, deepened, and extended through forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus speaks of forgiveness and community, and his call to his followers to be faithful in marriage and in all their relationships, to be gracious in sharing what they have been given with the poor and respond to the invitation to "be perfect" like our heavenly Father — holy, compassionate, merciful and forgiving and loving (see Mt 19). The parable that follows is a parable on community — on being in communion with each other and atoning with and for each other so that the community can be truly at-one in Jesus, to the glory of the Father in the power of the Spirit. The parable deals with the owner of a vineyard and his workers. Only Matthew includes it in his gospel, so it is focused toward his own community, made up of people from different backgrounds and traditions:

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. Going out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, "You too go into my vineyard and I will pay you what is just." So they went off. (And) he went out again around noon, and around three o'clock and did likewise. Going out about five o'clock, he found others standing around, and said to them,

"Why do you stand here idle all day?" They answered, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You too go into my vineyard." (Mt 20:1-8)

This was the routine for many day laborers at the time. At harvest time many more workers were needed to bring in the grapes before the weather changed or they rotted on the vines. Extra workers who had no permanent jobs would assemble in the middle of the village and wait to be hired. The usual day's wage was one denarius. The first batch of laborers would be sent out as early as possible before the heat became unbearable. But more and more laborers would be needed as the day wore on and those hired earlier began to weaken, or the grapes were not coming in as fast as needed. The earlier you went to work, the more you were paid. The first group knows — it's a full denarius. The second group will get whatever the owner decides is fair, as will the next two. And with the last group the vineyard owner makes no mention of what they will get. But the owner has complete control over the vineyard, the workers, the crop, and much that transpires in the village itself.

Jesus' listeners would know the scene well. Moreover, the vineyard had long been used as a metaphor for the relationship between Israel and Yahweh God who is always looking for the fruit of the covenant with the people of God. The crop is all-important — without grapes, there will be no wine, nothing to drink and celebrate with. The vineyard exists to bear fruit. As the familiar story continues his audience would begin to be shocked, as we still are today:

When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first." When those who had started about five o'clock came, each received the usual daily wage. So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day's burden and the heat." (Mt 20:9-12)

The first shock is that those who come last are paid first instead of those who worked the longest (and supposedly the hardest). The second is that those who worked one hour, or three or four or nine all get paid the same! Each group that came forward expected more because they had worked more. The group that worked all day (probably from four in the morning to four in the afternoon) definitely expect to get paid more, but the foreman gives them only what they contracted for, what everyone else has gotten. Thoroughly put out and annoyed, they complain loudly and angrily directly to the vineyard owner, not to the one handing out the pay:

He said to one of them in reply, "My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? (Or) am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?" Thus the last will be first, and the first will be last. (Mt 20:13-16)

There are more shocks! First the vineyard owner calls the worker who confronts him "friend." Then he says something about himself — that he chooses to treat all of the workers equally and pay them all the same. This is his justice. And he tells the worker that he's getting paid what he is because that was the deal they had made earlier, and he honors his commitments. Then he chastises the worker, however gently, telling him to be content and go home. The vineyard owner is who he is. He is generous and will continue to be generous even if offends others, such as those who judge their own lives and relationships against their own standards of what they perceive to be others' good fortune. Their standard breeds enviousness and society built on competition between winners and losers.

Then Jesus repeats one of his signature lines: "Thus the last will be first, and the first, last." Unlike in the kingdoms of the world, in the kingdom of heaven things work differently — fortune, power, even position. This, one of Jesus' most difficult parables, reveals most clearly his vision, his wisdom, the coming of the kingdom of heaven on earth. The kingdom comes in his presence and in the hope and good

news that God is our Father and we are the children of God — different only in our different needs, the neediest coming first.

The above parable's meaning and depth can be found by examining the description of how workers are chosen. When the owner comes out at the eleventh hour and sees workers standing around he asks them why they are idle. Their answer provides a key to understanding the true meaning of the parable: "No one has hired us." They are the ones no one wants, no one invites in, no one thinks to have work for — they are the least of our brothers and sisters. If the vineyard owner was interested only in getting his grapes picked efficiently and quickly, he would choose the best, the able-bodied, the experienced, the strong and healthy. Only later would he take the second best, then whoever might be able to work for a while, and then as the day goes he might choose the least — disabled, sick, ill, old, young children with little or no experience, or those thought to be slackers and trouble-makers. But this owner is interested not in productivity, but in making sure everyone is included. Jesus' parable reminds us that everyone needs food, shelter, health care, whatever gives a human being dignity, not mere survival but life ever more abundant.

In the kingdom of heaven God is concerned first with those at the bottom, those never chosen or chosen last, and so it must be with us. We are called to forgiveness, to reconciliation (walking with each other in all situations) and we are called to at-one-ment. It means all being one in the community and treated and respected as the beloved children of God, but also singling out those who are last, lost, not chosen, despised and forgotten, the least, to be honored first, cared for first. This is atonement. This is the beginning of restoring the world. It is the beginning, as the Jews call it, *otiklam olam* — repairing the world. We are to extend the gracious experience of forgiveness and reconciliation to those who have never known justice, equality, or dignity, who have never realized that they are the beloved children of God. We are all the brothers and sisters of Jesus — we are all one in our God.

In the parable those who worked and came first (like the chosen people of the earlier covenant) do not deal with the foreman who pays them, but they take their complaint straight to the vineyard owner. But Jesus changes the way God is known and revealed in the world — in

obedience to his knowledge of God as our Father. The parable hints at what is to come. Those who came first, and some of those who want the older covenant and the older interpretation of the laws and traditions to prevail, reject the foreman, Jesus, as well as his message that professing belief in God our Father, depends upon this new mercy, this new awareness and care for the least. Through this parable, Jesus is teaching that in the kingdom of heaven, so "close at hand," those closest and nearest to God — the poor and the lost, those most in need, those excluded by others — are the ones who reveal the presence of God so close to us. We touch God most intimately and closely in those shunned by society and even by church, by our own communities.

We are called to extend to them forgiveness and reconciliation into communion, into unity. This community of the kingdom of heaven, the presence of Jesus among us, and the power of the Spirit that gives glory to God the Father witnesses most strongly to others that God is with us. There is no limit to the depth and intimacy of what community can teach us about the pity, the compassion, the justice, and the holiness of our God.

The culmination of understanding forgiveness, reconciliation and at-one-ment is communion among us and, if we learn from Jesus how to "walk together again," among all on earth. This is God the Father's gift to us in Jesus and in the Spirit — communion with God.

I would like to close with a story I heard a few months after 9/11.

* A group had gone to visit the Acoma Pueblo, on a high mesa just east of Albuquerque. Its residents, who still honor the old ways and traditions, call it Sky City. After their tour of the pueblo, some of the visitors lingered to buy the pottery or bread that some of the Sky City community were selling. They began to talk to one of the elders sitting in front of his house about the events of 9/11. They asked him, "How did you hear about the news that day?" He answered, "We found out just like you did," and pulled out his cell phone. Everyone laughed because there is no running water or electricity up on the top of the mesa. Then the elder grew silent and looked at the group, all of whom were intently listening to him now. He said: "I'm so sorry. I apologize. It was our fault. It was all our fault." No

one knew what the man meant, or how to respond. He realized they did not understand him, so he said again: "I am so sorry. We all are. It was — it is our fault. You see, we believe that we are all one. We have a saying that is sometimes translated as 'all our relations' — it means that we are all one — everything and everyone created: birds, fish, animals, four-leggeds, two-leggeds, all human beings everywhere in the world. And we are responsible for each other and what others do. So it is our fault. We have not lived as we should. If we were living as human beings, other human beings would not be driven to do such terrible things. They would not be without hope, and filled with so much despair. We are so sorry, please forgive us. It is our fault that it happened." His words left everyone in the group speechless, and they wandered off awkwardly to buy their fry bread or pottery, and to walk or take their tour bus back down the mesa.

When I heard it, the story made perfect sense to me. We must honor all our relations so that something as horrible as 9/11 can never happen again. This is the culmination of understanding forgiveness, reconciliation and at-one-ment. It is communion among us and among all on earth — this is God the Father's gift to us in Jesus and in the Spirit — communion with God.

7

Healings and Feedings

There is a story from the early church (between the late second and the sixth centuries A.D.) that was told among the brothers and sisters who gathered in the desert to become holy, once the age of martyrdom had passed:

* Two brothers lived in the desert. Each had his own cell and followed the order of the prayers, study, fasting, and work. One rarely ventured out his cell, praying and fasting and doing penance for his sins and the sins of the world. The other followed the order of the night and day but rarely stayed in his cell. He went out daily, even on the day of the Son, to seek the sick and to bring them water, to bathe and clean them, and to tend their wounds, to feed them and comfort them. He would stay and listen to them, touch them carefully, sometimes be silent and sometimes sing to them. And an Elder who had been in the desert longest was asked: which of the two brothers is the most holy?

Without hesitation he replied: "If the brother who fasts and prays were to do this for seventy years and endure all manner of hardships in silence, and suffer terrible penances — his whole life would not equal even one moment of kindness and care of the brother who cares for the sick and the infirm. You have to ask? How long have you been among us and do not know this truth?"