

## “Grudge Match,” March 21, 2010

Author Mort Crim wrote a book entitled *Second Thoughts on: How to Be as Terrific as Your Dog Thinks You Are*. One of the things he noted about dogs is that it is impossible for them to get ulcers, even though they can get a lot of other things that afflict humans, but not ulcers. Crim said he figured one reason for that is that they don't hold grudges. He went on to say, “Refusing to let go of an indignity, a slight or an insult is one of the most destructive things we can do to ourselves.”

Indeed it is, and yet it's something that many of us have trouble letting go of. Someone criticizes us for one thing or another, and we tuck it away, waiting to add other such comments to our stash. We keep count of all the little insults or slights that we experience, and we vow to hold onto them as long as we live. Someone wrongs us in a business deal, and we add up the toll, and then allow it to accumulate and grow larger and larger.

While that kind of thing happens a lot, we need to realize the destructive nature of holding a grudge, or holding somebody's failures against them. For one thing, it lessens us as a person. Malcolm Forbes put it like this: “Keeping score of old scores and scars, getting even and one-upping, always makes you less than you are.”

If that isn't enough, we need to realize how significantly holding onto a hurt impacts a relationship; it builds a stone barrier between us, and moves us farther and farther away from one another. Even with all that, we need to realize that the real damage is done to the one who holds onto the grudge, because it turns the that person into a sour and unhappy victim, making him or her someone others prefer to avoid.

Carrying a grudge is deadly. William Walton has said, “To carry a grudge is ilke being stung to death by one bee.” Someone else has likened carrying a grudge to walking around with a backpack filled with stones. At first, it may seem manageable, but as we continue making our way, the stones become heavier and heavier, weighing us down and giving us an incredible amount of pain. We have to find a way to unload the rocks from the backpack and lighten our load, if we want to live a life that is more meaningful and successful.

I suppose one of the first steps to dealing with the grudges we might be holding

onto is to acknowledge the issue, and recognize that we have a problem. Primary among the realities of holding a grudge is what it's doing to our quality of life, how it's impacting our relationships, and how we ourselves are the ones most being punished by harboring the grudge. Then we have to decide to take control of our thoughts, and to stop our self-destructive ways. We have to become intentional about focusing on the positives in our lives, instead of replaying over and over the hurts and insults we believe we have suffered.

We must learn to let go of the hurt and to forgive, which is the ultimate healing balm. It's amazingly difficult to forgive those who hurt us in one way or another, but it's absolutely essential. Otherwise, we'll be eaten alive by the bitterness, pain and perceived cruelty. As Anne Lamott said in her book, *Traveling Mercies*, “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”

This is something I believe Jesus understood completely, and why he said what he did about forgiveness. Our Bible passage today is from Matthew's Gospel, and tells of one of the disciples, Peter, getting up the courage to ask Jesus about forgiveness. This is how it goes:

At that point, Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?”

Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.”

It's interesting that Peter thought he was being extraordinarily generous in suggesting that forgiving a brother or sister seven times was enough, actually more than enough. Yet Jesus doesn't seem to think so. “Try seventy times seven,” he responds. That isn't meant to be a literal number of times, but rather indicates that forgiveness never ends; it's goes on into infinity. There's no limit to the number of times we're to forgive; we're just to keep on forgiving.

I've said before that forgiveness looks a lot like love,” and it is the most loving act we can offer another. However, it's also one of the hardest things we have to do, and it doesn't seem to come naturally for most of us. What is forgiveness, really, and how do we go about developing a forgiving spirit?

There are many ways we can understand forgiveness, but I like how Katherine Piderman, PhD, chaplain at Mayo Clinic, chose to define it. She said this: “Forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge.” She clarifies that forgiveness is an act

of will; it is a conscious decision to lessen the grip that a hurt or wrong has on us, and that clears the way for us to focus on the more positive aspects of our lives. Forgiveness does not mean that we're denying the other person's responsibility for inflicting the hurt, but rather that we're choosing to let go of the pain, and even obsession with the pain, in order to find a freer and more meaningful life. Forgiving moves us out of the victim role, and takes away the power that the wrongful act or the wrongdoer has had over us.

There are many benefits that come from developing a forgiving spirit. Our relationships become healthier, and we have a higher degree of personal well-being. There's less internal stress and built-up hostility, fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety or chronic pain. Issues of substance abuse are reduced considerably when we choose to forgive rather than become obsessed with the wounds we believe someone has caused us.

If it's so good and so good for us, then probably most of us need to learn how to become a forgiving person. Piderman states, "Forgiveness is a commitment to a process of change." In other words, we don't snap our fingers and forgive; it just doesn't work that way, and in fact, it may take a long time before we are really ready to forgive, and even longer before we come to the realization that we really have forgiven what has happened.

I recall reading something that C.S. Lewis once talked about. He said that, as a teen, he was sent to a boarding school, a common practice among British youth in his day. The schoolmaster was a very severe man, who was extremely harsh with Lewis, and badly damaged his sense of himself. Years later, he wrote about trying with all his might to forgive the man, but realizing that it was still an ongoing process for him, and perhaps one, because of the extent of the hurt, that might take him a lifetime. Even though he was unable to say that he had finally forgiven the schoolmaster, he was keenly aware of the need to forgive, and it was his desire to do so. That's what we mean when we say forgiveness is a process of change.

One thing we have to remember is that, just because we have forgiven doesn't guarantee that there will be reconciliation. Forgiveness is, in many ways, what we do for ourselves, and the offender may not even be aware of it. We may or may not receive an apology or some sort of restitution. Our forgiving may not have any impact on the

wrongdoer at all, and we need to understand that. Of course, forgiving is far easier to accomplish if the other person offers genuine remorse or apology, and expresses an earnest desire to make things right, but there's no guarantee that will happen.

There's something else we need to understand when it comes to forgiveness, and the words found in the Lord's Prayer serve as a reminder of it. Those words are, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." In other words, each of us stands in need of forgiveness as much as we need to offer forgiveness. We're imperfect people, human beings who intentionally or unintentionally inflict hurt on one another, very often on those we profess to love the most. Sometimes we just need to forgive people for being who they are, and not hold them to a higher standard than we hold for ourselves. That comes when we develop a deeper sense of compassion for the plight of humanity, and our less-than-perfect ways of relating to one another.

Rachel Remen, in her book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, tells a story about something that happened on Yom Kippur, the Day of atonement, when Jews everywhere reflect on the year that has past, repent of the shortcomings and unkindness, and seek forgiveness from God. One particular Yom Kippur, her Rabbi did not speak about God's forgiveness.

Instead, he walked out into the congregation, took his infant daughter from his wife, and carrying her in his arms, stepped up to the podium. Remen said the child was about a year old and adorable as she looked out at the congregation and smiled. Everyone smiled back, and the rabbi began his traditional Yom Kippur sermon.

As his attention drifted away from the child, she reached out and grabbed his nose. He gently freed himself and continued the sermon, while everyone chuckled. Next she took his tie and put it in her mouth. The rabbi rescued his tie, and smiled at his child, as she put her tiny arms around his neck. Then looking out over the congregation, he said, "Think about it. Is there anything she can do that you could not forgive her for?"

Thinking of their own children and grandchildren, the people gathered there began to nod in understanding. That was when the child went for his glasses, and everyone laughed out loud. Retrieving his glasses and repositioning them, he waited for silence, and

then he asked, "And when does that stop? When does it get hard to forgive? At three? At seven? At fourteen? At thirty-five? How old does someone have to be before you forget that everyone is a child of God?"

It seems to me that's a good question for each of us to ask ourselves: Have we stopped forgiving? And if so, how do we recapture the understanding that each of us is a child of God, and in need of one another's forgiveness?

Closing:

Sue Patton Thoele said, "We...need to be able to forgive, because if we don't, we put our foot right down on the hose of our life force."

Forgiveness is a gift of love we can offer one another. So, as we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we will begin right this moment, to practice the art of forgiving, because every single one of us needs it.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.  
Amen.