

From this week's Epistle, from the Letter of St. Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you..

Ephesians 4:31-32

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Her name was Daisy.¹ She was born in 1898; into a working-class family in the city of Chicago. She was the 8th of 10 children. Her father struggled in so many ways. He struggled to earn enough to feed them all; and after he took up drinking, the money got a whole lot scarcer. He was, as she later described him, a mean drunk; violent with her baby brother and sister. And she came to hate him with all of her heart. One day, without any warning, he ordered his wife out of the house. All ten of her children crowded around her; clinging to her skirts; crying; begging her not to leave. But their father refused to back down. Holding to each other for support, they watched as she walked down the sidewalk, a suitcase gripped in each hand; growing smaller and smaller, until she finally disappeared from view. In time, some of the kids were able to rejoin their mother in her new life; but the family was broken up; and some were forced to go live with relatives. And it fell to Daisy to stay with her father; to keep house. But she grew up quickly; bitter and angry; hating her father for what he had done to her family.

Then, one day, without any warning, her father just disappeared. Where he went nobody knew; or cared. But many years later, to everyone's surprise, he showed up again; just as suddenly. Somewhere along the way, he had hit the bottom; and hunger and cold had forced him to seek shelter. But before he could get his meal, he was forced to attend a worship service. And to his own surprise most of all, he turned to Christ. He sobered up. He began to read the Scriptures. And he prayed. For the first time in his life he actually felt loved. And when he later spoke to his children, he asked to be forgiven. He asked to be forgiven for all that he had done to them; all the hurt and sorrow and deep pain that he had caused them. He knew that he couldn't change the past; that he couldn't just magically make everything right. But he was sorry; more than they could imagine. His children, by now middle-aged with families of their own, were sceptical. They found it hard to believe that he wasn't just showing up now to ask for money. But when he held steady, in time they forgave him. All of them, that is, except Daisy. She had sworn that she would never speak to her father again; that she wanted no part of him. She felt that he couldn't just undo all that he had done to them just by saying that he was sorry. And that's how it stayed. For years. Even when the damage from all these years of drinking weakened him and he was dying. And even though she lived only eight doors up the street from where he lived, with one of her sisters, a route that she had to walk almost every day, Daisy kept her vow. She never once stopped in to visit her father; and he died without ever seeing her again.

All her life Daisy was determined that she would not be like her father. And to keep that promise, she never touched a drop of alcohol. But, in her own way, she ruled her family with another form of brutal tyranny. She would lie on the couch nursing her headaches, screaming at the kids telling them to be quiet; telling them that they had

¹ The story of Daisy, Margaret, and Michael is recounted by Philip Yancey in *The Scandal of Forgiveness* (Zondervan; 2021) pages 35-40; and *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Zondervan; 1997) pages 75-81.

ruined her life. She was hard as a rock. She never apologized; and she never forgave. Her daughter Margaret remembers that time well; how incredibly hard it was. And she too was determined that she would not be like her mother. But, later, when her son Michael was in his teenage years, in the 1960s, and he started to behave as many teenage kids did in the 1960s, she kicked him out. And she told him that she never wanted to see him again; as long as she lived. A promise which, sadly, she kept as the decades passed.

What does it mean to be forgiven? And what does it mean to forgive? Those two critical questions lie at the heart of what we hear in this week's readings from Holy Scripture. But, even more importantly, they lie at the heart of our life together in Jesus Christ. It is, truth be told, a very tricky business, this forgiveness business; tricky enough that we so easily get confused about what forgiveness is really all about. When God forgives us, as He does in Jesus Christ, God doesn't just magically forget what we've done, as if He suffers from amnesia. God can no more stop remembering than He can stop existing. Nor does God just wink at our sin, as if He were some kind of smiling, tolerant grandfather willing to spoil his grandkids. Forgiveness is not tolerance; and tolerance is not forgiveness.

What God does when He forgives us is far deeper; and far more profound. And it is more hopeful than any of those other things we try to use as a substitute. It involves no casual disregard for the depth of our disobedience; it doesn't pretend that the pain isn't real; but, rather, God forgives in spite of all that we have done; fully aware of what our faults and our failings may be. God forgives because the full weight of all human disobedience, the full weight of all human sin, was carried to the Cross by Christ. His life was the price paid that that all sin might all be forgiven. You; and me; and even those who have hurt us. And when God forgives us in Christ, He chooses not to hold against us all that we have done², and will yet do, that falls short of full perfect love: love for Him and perfect love for each other. God refuses to count our sins against us because of Jesus Christ. So forgiveness is necessarily tied to sacrificial, self-giving love: to God's love for us; to our love for God; and to the love that God calls us to have for each other.

And in a broken world; in a world paralysed by unreconciled sin, there really is no other way. We can choose to love, and, by necessity, forgive; or we can choose not to forgive, and, by necessity, not love. We cannot love without forgiving; and real forgiveness is only possible in love. So we can live in this endless cycle of bitterness and revenge; hurting ourselves and hurting those around us in some vain effort to hurt those who have hurt us. We can pass on from one person to the next, from one generation to the next, from Daisy to Margaret to Michael, this unbroken chain of resentment, hard-wired into our human DNA; or we can, by grace, choose to be free. We can be held captive my memory, unable to move forward, paralysed by resentment. Or, in Jesus Christ, and because of Jesus Christ, we can pick up our bed and go home.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

² ἀφίημι (from ἀπό, "away from" and hiēmi, "send") - (a) I send away, (b) I let go, release, permit to depart, (c) I remit, forgive, (d) I permit, suffer.