

I recently heard the story of a young family from a few years ago. Things were not going well for them. The parents were fighting a lot and the kids were often caught in between. They were in elementary school, a girl and a boy, one who was 6 and another who was 9. They sensed something was wrong, hearing hushed but harsh voices in the next room, painful silences at dinner and finally, with their father leaving home.

The strain was great on the mother, who found herself alone and with two kids. Even with a good paying job, it was a lot for her to balance and she would find herself feeling resentful and depressed. One day when she was picking up the kids from school, she was feeling especially down. As the kids piled into the car, they were clearly engaged in some back and forth with each other, fighting about something that happened at school. From the front seat, the boy kept turning around, twisting in his seatbelt, to trade accusations and insults, and the sister would taunt him, slightly out of reach, from the back.

After a few minutes, the mother felt herself getting upset. She told them to calm down, to relax, but they didn't, or wouldn't. After several increasing threatening warnings, she had had enough. At a stoplight, the boy turned back to his little sister, and the mother responded. She grabbed him, gripping his shoulder, and shoved him hard back into his seat, yelling at him to be quiet. She pushed him hard enough that his body hit the side of the door his head banged against the window. He let out a shout of surprise and pain. She had never treated done anything like that before. The car grew silent and they continued driving.

The boy would remember that incident for years. His relationship with his mother would deteriorate after that: more arguments followed, fueled by disagreements, mistrust and anger. Even when the mother apologized and learned to manage her emotions better, their relationship never seemed the same. By the end of his teenage years, they were hardly speaking.

The story of people being hurt by those close to them is a common one. We've probably all been there. We've been teased by a sibling, disappointed by a partner, felt the unfair anger of a parent.

When we are hurt, we feel pain. Sometime physical, sometime emotional. We also feel confusion. We wonder how someone we care about, even someone we love and respect, can act in such hurtful ways. That's probably what the boy was thinking. How could she be someone who loved him, someone he admired, while also being someone who could be so angry and so flawed?

There are no easy answers to these questions. People, even those we care about deeply, even good people we respect and love, are capable of doing regrettable, even terrible things. That is deeply unsettling. And it's not only them. We all are like that. We're not only the wounded, but the wounding. Some more often than others, but it's true all the same.

That we each contain the seeds of harm does not mean we are bad. Or that we must be ruled by them. It means we are complicated, made from some messy combination of hopes and wounds, yearnings and emotions, values and personal histories. From that mix, great good can come, but also great harm. I suspect we all know a few good people who have surprised us by doing bad things. The lines are not always clear, people are not simple good or bad. Seeing this complexity opens the door for compassion and forgiveness.

When responding to someone who has hurt us, we are left with two choices. One is to end the relationship, cut the person out, say goodbye. We conclude they are too toxic, too painful, or maybe we've tried to reconcile many times before. Sometimes this will be the right choice.

The other choice is to forgive. This is more difficult and more risky. It means maybe being harmed again, disappointed again, wasting precious time again. It means hard and honest conversation. But it may be the only way to keep that person in our life. And if we care about them enough, and if we remember that human beings are complicated and messy and that there are no good or bad people, we might start the process of forgiving.

When our young boy grew up, he and his mother rarely saw each other, and hardly talked. And then, one day, she called him. She told him she was ill, and that she needed chemo and that she would really love to see him. And just like that, he was faced with this same hard choice. To stay away, to remain apart, or to forgive.

After much soul searching, he chose forgiveness. Not because his faith told him so, or because he had forgotten the pain she had caused. But because he wanted his mother back. Even with her flaws and imperfections and what she'd done: the relationship was more important than all that. In talking with her, he started to learn that she was a person, just like him, who was scared about being sick, who had struggled and suffered through a bad marriage and single parenting, who had known disappointment, brokenness, and loneliness. That there was good in her, worth forgiving, worth opening his heart too, and showing tenderness.

That's the big choice: to keep a relationship or let it go. When it's someone we care about, even someone who has done wrong, we can choose forgiveness, because despite it all, we hope, we pray, we risk believing that goodness abides in every human heart and that a better future is possible. If you can, if it's right, I hope you take this chance. From it comes liberation from resentment and release from grudges that weigh us down. There lies the promise of reconciliation, the possibility of redemption and a slow but steady path to healing. And in the end, we may discover, the joy of a deeper, more honest, and more steadfast love. May it be so with you and all you hold dear, through the good and the bad, with peace and compassion your guide. Amen.

I spent a while looking at poems about the prodigal son.
There are some good ones, and some famous ones.
Some were too saccharine, and some were too long,
but the real problem with most of them is that they made it too simple.
Wild and foolish son goes off into the world.
Spends his fortune, is reckless.
Finds himself having hit bottom.
Desperate, he realizes he can go home.
Arrives, is forgiven and celebrated.
Moral of the story: the father, who forgives, is loving and merciful.
It's way too simple.

Schuyler talked about how risky it can be to offer forgiveness;
for the son to forgive the mother,
risking that re-connection, risking that relationship.
To take down the wall we've built up,
the resentment we've harbored and fed like a invasive weed.
And yet, how, often, taking that risk is worth it,
forgiving another is makes the relationship possible,
how it frees us from the mistakes of the past and opens up the future.
I want to say a word about the other side:
the risk it takes to ask for forgiveness.
To say, I'm sorry, forgive me.
Take me back.
Can we start again?

There are similarities, of course,

in the risk between offering forgiveness and asking for it,
the risk of relationship, of connection,
which is always tenuous because we human beings
are finite, imperfect, and sometimes foolish.

But it's a very different position, isn't it?

To ask for forgiveness for what we have done?

When we do this, we place ourselves at the mercy of the other:
who might decide not to offer that forgiveness.

Or, and this is why I selected Edith Nesbitt's poem in the end,
even worse, in some ways, even worse:
our request for forgiveness might be granted.

They might say, yes, we take you back,
and you are still loved,
and you pay the price with every tear,
with every kiss and every embrace,
you pay the price of your foolishness.

I know that some of you have hit rock bottom,
just like the wayward son.

You've been far from home, and squandered your gifts,
and then, somehow or another,
you decided to make the journey back to health.

You got to the 9th step, and asked for amends from those persons you had harmed,
except when doing so would cause additional injury to them.

That's a terrifying moment, isn't it?

To say, I did wrong and I ask for your forgiveness?

Terrifying.

If they say no, I won't forgive you,

well, that hurts, but you can say to yourself,
they're kind of a jerk, aren't they?

This is what we say, right?

When we say we're sorry - for a big thing or a little thing -
but the other person won't let it go?

We look like, feel like, the good person,
and they look like, feel like, the mean one.

And we can keep our armor on, keep some sense of dignity.

We apologized, but they were the cruel person.

If they say, though, yes, I forgive you. I love you, and I forgive you.

If they say that, then we remain the vulnerable one.

We face that we hurt this person who cares for us,
and we face that we were cared for all the time;
the excuses fall away, and we stand there, open-hearted,
before our own conscience, before our own soul.

This is a huge risk. The risk of facing ourselves.

When we screw up and we cut off the relationship, forever,
then we never have to face ourselves again.

We bury the memory, the mistake, in the past.

When we ask for forgiveness, we risk raising the dead,
we risk having to feel, to feel hope and love and pain and all the rest;
we risk coming alive.

When we return again to who we are,
we have to face who we are:

both the good and the not so good.

And that is risky.

Welcome back, says the father and the mother and the rest,
though the brother is resentful, and understandably so.

We forgive you,
but you will pay the price for your time in the South,
the price in your soul.
But that price, that cost,
the story tells us, is worth it.
This is the point.

Asking for forgiveness is risky -
because we might get it and have to be real, and feel, and present.
And that's not easy,
but that reconciliation, that life of fullness and presence,
that life of love and hope and promise,
that life is worth it.

Not just because the son no longer lives in material squalor,
hungry and desperate - indeed, that's the least of it.
No, the life of forgiveness and love and hope is worth it,
because it is here - not alone in our self-righteous guilt -
it is here in connection and communion,
with our hands joined across the aisle,
our hands which clapped with joy and clenched in fear,
held the bread of life and wiped the crumbs away,
each and every one of us,
it is here in connection and communion
that life is truly lived, it is here where we are called to be,
to become, where the true joy of love and mercy lives.
It is worth the risk because it the only way to learn to fly.

When the villagers let go of the grudges,
stop recording every hurt, throw out the records of misdeeds,

then what happens?

Love happens. Community happens. Joy happens.

There will continue to be mistakes and wounds and fear.

There will be betrayal and anguish and trouble.

Those aren't going away.

And sometimes it will be us who make those mistakes.

And sometimes it will be us to whom a mistake is made.

And sometimes we will face our fear,

and we will offer forgiveness,

and we will ask for it,

and sometimes it will be given, and accepted,

and we will pay the cost,

and we will reap the rewards,

the joy of life and connection and possibility.

Sometimes we hit rock bottom.

Sinking down into our sorrow's ground.

Sometimes this happens.

And we can stay there; it's safer, in some ways.

But it isn't the life you or I or anyone is called to.

It's not the life that matters,

that sings with the beauty of life and love.

So we risk forgiving and being forgiven,

and our friends, our family,

for some, our God,

open their arms and their hearts,

and so we live again, we return again,

though we've broken our vows a thousand times,

we join the caravan of no despair,

and we sing to love and all friends,
and life is real:
real and dangerous and honest and beautiful and connected,
and that is the life for which we long in our deepest hearts,
so let go of your fear, risk being yourself,
forgive and ask for forgiveness,
and let your life be full of the love that breaks down walls,
the love that overcomes differences,
and heals all wounds,
and puts to flight all fears,
now and always.

Let us sing.