

Forgive and Be Free



September 11, 2011



If you're over the age of 16, you almost certainly remember exactly where you were and what you were doing 10 years ago today. I was in Stavelly, Alberta and I was pregnant with Stanley and just waking up. My alarm was set for 7 o'clock and I woke up to breaking news on the CBC about a plane hitting the North Tower of the World Trade Centre. (Remember Alberta is two hours behind most of Ontario and New York). Only 18 minutes later, the news room went into a frenzy as they talked about a second plane crashing into the South Tower. I got out of bed, turned on the TV, and stayed glued to it for hours.

We all remember hearing of the first and then the second plane.

We remember watching with horror the South Tower collapse, and half an hour later the second tower collapse. We remember the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania and finding out later the heroic acts of some passengers.

We remember the fire-fighters and police and others who risked and lost their lives at Ground Zero. We remember the air space being shut down and all in bound international flights being diverted to Canada, and how Newfoundlanders responded with tremendous hospitality. We remember some of the stories of those who strangely decided not to go to work that day, and those who didn't have to go to work but did.

It's funny how clearly we remember certain events. We don't remember everything. Last week on the radio I was listening to a professor talk about memory, especially as it related to PTSD – post traumatic stress disorder. We don't remember details of an ordinary routine walk down the street, for example, but we would remember that same walk if something unusual or emotionally charged took place on that walk. There are some things in life we never forget.

The body forgets physical pain. You can remember that it hurt like *h-e- double hockey sticks* but you can't actually conjure up the physical pain unless you still have it. But emotional pain, that's something else. I've often had people say to me: "I can't talk about it. It's just too painful." Even when we try to avoid talking about or thinking about that painful incident it will, against our will, jump into our mind. The simplest things like a song on the radio or someone walking down the street who looks a bit like that person can trigger deep pain and send you back as though hardly any time had passed at all.

Forgive and forget. It's a nice thought. Most, if not all of us have hurts in our lives that we'd love to forget. We try very hard to bury the pain or medicate the pain but it is almost impossible to *forget* the pain. But what about forgiving? Is that impossible too? It might feel impossible. There is an epitaph in a cemetery in Atlanta that a woman had inscribed on the tomb of her adulterous husband. The epitaph said, "Gone, but not forgiven." Some of you can relate to that emotion. Not forgiven and clearly not forgotten either.

Forgiving is not easy. Revenge is much easier, and seems to come much more naturally. If we've been hurt we want retribution. We want "justice"—our idea of justice, not to be confused with God's idea of justice.

I read about a married couple who had a lot of arguments. Yet somehow the wife always stayed calm and collected. One day her husband commented on his wife's restraint. "When I get mad at you," he said, "you never fight back. How do you control your anger?" The wife said: "I work it off by cleaning the toilet." The husband asked: "How does that help?" She replied: "I use your toothbrush!"

I want to remind you of what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not saying that it's ok to hurt or that it's ok that you were hurt. There's a difference between excusing and forgiving. We excuse people for minor offenses, like when someone accidentally bumps into us. But if it's the kind of hurt that goes on hurting for months and years — if it's the kind of hurt that you can't forget, then you can't excuse that hurt. Don't confuse forgiving with excusing. As I read the scriptures and as I walk this life of faith, I know that God cares deeply for those who suffer and for those who are unjustly treated. God knows how you have suffered, and it's *not ok* that you hurt.



Forgiveness is not excusing a hurt, but neither is it reconciliation. Sometimes with forgiveness reconciliation can come, but reconciliation takes two parties. Sometimes reconciliation is impossible, particularly if the other party has died or denies the hurt caused and shows no remorse whatsoever. Reconciliation takes two, and you only have control over one person in this life. Guess who? You. Reconciliation takes two. Forgiveness takes one.

It is difficult to forgive, but the truth is, it is more difficult to live with the effects of not forgiving. The writer Catherine Ponder wrote: "When you hold resentment toward another, you are bound to that person or condition by an emotional link that is stronger than steel. Forgiveness is the only way to dissolve that link and get free."

Dr. M. Scott Peck, a psychiatrist, says in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, that unless we are able to at least move toward the work of forgiving the person who hurt us, even when the person does not deserve our forgiveness, there will not be mental health. Forgiveness is not easy. And yet, not forgiving can take a greater toll on us than forgiving ever could. What is the alternative to refusing to forgive? Isn't it to carry around for a lifetime a feeling of bitterness, resentment, and simmering hatred? Why would you do that to yourself?

Someone has said that letting hatred simmer within us, eating at our emotions and our body, is like burning down our house to get rid of rats.

If you have hurts in your life that you can't forget, in order to have freedom and peace you need to forgive. How do you forgive? Bring Jesus into it. He understood how critical it was to forgive. It wasn't just talk for him. Among his last words spoken before he died was "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." He didn't say that because he was just so nice and because it didn't bother him. Jesus was fully divine, but he was also fully human. The physical torture hurt, but far more painful was the betrayal of a friend and the public humiliation and shame. He could have said from the cross "You'll see who will laugh last.", but he didn't. He forgave them because he truly did understand that they didn't know what they were doing. But just as much, he forgave because he couldn't die with darkness clinging to him. He couldn't defeat the darkness if he let it in. He could not have risen from the grave with the weight of unforgiveness on him. He couldn't live if he didn't forgive.

It's the same with you. If you can't forget, then you need to forgive to find peace. You might need to forgive a person who is or was very close. You might need to forgive someone you don't know at all except for that hurt. You might need to forgive an organization, a church or a country. You might need to forgive God. You might need to forgive yourself. I encourage you now in a time of silence to forgive whatever pain you can't forget. Say something like "*God, I'm not perfect, but you know how I've been hurt. I want to be set free. And so today I choose to forgive _____ and I place this person or situation in your care. I let go of any claim or desire for revenge. I ask you to break off any ties of the soul or the heart that I have with this hurt. Bring healing and peace to my life.*" Sometimes one prayer will do, but often when the pain rears its head you'll need to pray again and again—perhaps as many as seven times and maybe seventy times seven times. You still won't forget, but each time you forgive you will be a little more free.

As I wrote this sermon an old folk song called *For Those Tears I Died*, written by Marsha Stevens, kept playing in my head. The chorus goes:

*"Come to the water, stand by my side.
I know you are thirsty; you won't be denied.
I felt every tear drop when in darkness you cried,
and strove to remind you that for those tears I died."*

Jesus died to set you free and to give you new life. I pray that you will make the courageous decision to forgive today, and so experience a full life of peace.

Thanks be to God.

This message was followed by a ceremony of lighting candles in which everyone present was invited to participate. As we placed our burning candles in trays of sand, we remembered 9/11, and prayed to forgive those who have hurt us. We did this in the name of Jesus, the Light of the World.