



World Council of Churches

“Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

*Sermon by Deenabandhu Manchala on Day of Encounter organized to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the John Knox Centre and 500 Anniversary of the birth of John Knox
Ecumenical Centre, Geneva on 2 June 2013*

Something that I heard from a movie *The Rum Diary* that I saw recently has really stuck on my mind. One of the characters says that of all the living species, it is only the human beings who seem to need God, create images of God, and pray to God for protection and prosperity, but destroy everything that God created. Isn't it true that we, human beings, have the exclusive capacity to inflict pain on and cause damage in intense, consistent and concerted manners on others as well as on the rest of creation? Let us be reminded of stark realities of abuse and aggression, violence and wars, hunger and poverty, destruction of the environment and the consequent natural calamities, of our world today everywhere.

On the other hand, we, as human beings, also have the exclusive capacity to build on God's creation through our intellectual and emotional faculties to be creative and responsible, and to care and be compassionate. In order that “God's will is done so that God's kingdom may come”, Jesus teaches the value of respect for self, others and relationships through this prayer: “Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” This is the only sentence in the prayer which is exclusively about human relationships. Jesus, by calling us to hold ourselves accountable to our tendency to sin against one another, teaches us a crucial aspect that builds and sustains relationships and community. There are two things here. Forgive us as we forgive. Seeking forgiveness and claiming to have forgiven. Extremely difficult, threatening and costly actions! Imperial and colonial powers took several centuries to seek the forgiveness of the peoples that they have destroyed in their greed for power and wealth. Here we are also faced with two questions: One, do we or can we always forgive? And two, while turning to God, do we also seek forgiveness from others that we have offended?

Some of us do turn to God for forgiveness because of the fear of God's punishment. But we avoid, hesitate to or are afraid of seeking forgiveness from the one we have caused harm. We are afraid of making ourselves humble because in doing so, we make ourselves accountable for our actions, and we lose control over our will and lives. We are afraid of walking the hard path of speaking the truth, and seeking reconciliation by healing and restoring the dignity of the ones that we have destroyed in seeking our selfish interests. We lie, deny or explore all possibilities to avoid holding ourselves accountable. Paula Coelho, a survivor of rebel attacks on a village in Northern Angola, cautions: “Churches always talk about forgiveness that you must forgive because God forgives you. But I am not God, and if a guy who messed up my whole life, just gives me a lame ‘Sorry’, then the burden is on my part to forgive and give him back a good conscience when he has just given me a word....I am ready to forgive when this guy has restored at least those things that can be restored to me and I will forgive at a time when I know. ... It's only when I am re-membered, when I am fully a member and subject again that I can forgive, otherwise it's a give-away, cheap grace. I can tell you many such stories from my own Indian experience. What does forgiveness mean to a young girl who is gang raped? What does it mean to a family or a community whose sources of livelihood are taken away to satisfy the greed of the wealthy landlord? What does forgiveness mean to thousands of people who are maimed for life in wars and conflicts that are waged to satiate the greed for power or in Bhopal,

India some twenty years ago because a multinational pesticide company did not ensure safety measures to save costs? At a personal level, what does forgiveness mean to abused children, neglected parents, a betrayed spouse, or the loss of a dear one because of medical neglect?

Some of us are also reluctant to seek forgiveness because of the arrogance that some of us suffer from. This arrogance operates both at larger and personal levels. In my country India which is dominated by the cultures of caste hierarchy and patriarchy, the wealthy and the dominant caste communities tend to believe that they are entitled to abuse and exploit the poor and vulnerable oppressed caste communities. A dominant caste community person would never say 'sorry' to a person who belongs to a low caste community, or a man to a woman, or an older person to a younger one. My experience here in Europe is also not very different. Some of us think that we are never wrong, we can never commit mistakes and even if we do, there is always a reason, and a justification. We feel entitled to seek our fantasies and pleasures even it implies trampling over other people's lives. I am sure that many of us also have met or live with such people. Such attitudes expose the distortion and disfigurement, and the inauthentic, false selfhood that features their personalities as well as the structures we are talking about. For such the very thought of seeking forgiveness is hurtful to their distorted selfhood and scary as it makes them feel vulnerable. Here we forget the God whom we want to forgive us is also the one who renders justice, quite likely to the one we have offended.

Sometimes, some of us who constantly anchor ourselves in spiritual exercises of prayer and introspection may be reluctant to accept our complicity in sin. Sin is not just personal or is about personal morality but also structural and destructive to others. Even if we do not always feel that we have not caused pain and suffering to others, we must recognize that we live in a world which by legitimizing and institutionalizing injustice allows some to flourish, enjoy power, privileges and opportunities, while depriving many the basic necessities of life. Our dominant political, economic and social ideologies are the case in point. Some of us are very enthusiastic about preaching the gospel to the poor as if they are in need of conversion for their sins but avoid doing the same to the rich as if they don't need to repent for their sins. The poor or the vulnerable people are the sinned against and their sin is their inability to resist, or in a way, their sin is forgiving even before or without their offender seeking forgiveness. Forgiveness for them is a survival mechanism that they sort to when justice is inaccessible or denied and when one needs to survive somehow. This is often the case with the poor, and all those who are disempowered and powerless and live as dependents on people, systems and institutions.

Therefore, we must admit that we belong to a sinful ethos and our sin often is our silence and compliance with the status quo. We are all, therefore, sinners, complicit with structures, cultures, values and attitudes that cause pain and death. Jesus, therefore, by teaching us to seek forgiveness and to forgive, is actually calling us to make ourselves vulnerable. Vulnerability is not a sign of weakness but of strength, a virtue that enables us to be more like the way that God wants of us. In making ourselves vulnerable, we affirm that we are responsible towards one another and accountable to one another within the household of God. In making ourselves vulnerable, you discover yourself, your capacity to be and to become more human and to restore the image of God that has been distorted in us and in others while we indulged in our self seeking and irresponsible self-assertion. Vulnerability, therefore, is a sign of spiritual and moral transformation, and as assertion that you have the capacity to love others as much as you love yourself. Therefore, seeking God's forgiveness is not enough; it is equally important to seek forgiveness of others. In 1 John (4.20), we are warned "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen".

Now, let us understand forgiving others who harm and hurt us. Even it is most often extremely hard and difficult, forgiveness heals and transforms. Forgiveness is and has power. Each of us has many such experiences. Therefore, in the letter of James, we are encouraged to confess our sins to each other so that you may be healed. Forgiveness heals and leads to reconciliation and restoration of relationships when truth is spoken and forgiveness is sought by the offender. But this may not always happen. In cases where it did happen, people's lives, families and communities have been rebuilt.

However, forgiveness is necessary so that you do not give a lasting victory to your offender. Forgiving is a statement that you do not want to be led by the logic of the distorted false self-hood of your aggressor. It is an assertion of your true inner self, and your spiritual and moral freedom from within that refuses to be affected by the evil caused by others. By forgiving, you play according to your own values and goodness, and not by the logic of your aggressor. But it may not and always need not effect transformation in the other. That needn't be the reason for your inability to forgive.

A friend of mine whom I forgave in love and with a good Christian conscience after a breach of trust, thought of me as weak, as one with low self-esteem, and so repeated the same behaviour. The point I am making is that forgiveness does not always work to effect transformation in people who live with damaged personality traits and distorted egoistic self-understanding. When Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answers, "not seven times, but seventy-seven times. (Mt: 18:22) We often fail to notice the elaboration of this assertion in the following parable which tells us about the fate of the one who received pardon, fails to pardon others. Many times we want others to be kind, compassionate and forgiving when we feel pushed to the corner. But when we feel safe and strong, we refuse to be considerate. In forgiving such and moving away, we let go of the possibility for the offender to harm us more. Therefore, As Jesus says, 'If your brother or sister sins go and point out their fault, just between the two of you, because you have a responsibility. If they listen to you, it is good for her or him. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the community, and leave them and protect yourself and your sanity'. (Mt.18: 15-20) As I said that the God to whom they turn to forgiveness is also the one who renders justice, quite likely to the ones they have offended.

Let me sum up: Forgiving and seeking forgiveness, though hard and threatening, are both liberative and transformative, for the offended and the offender. In forgiving and in seeking forgiveness with God and with our neighbours we become, more and more what we are designed to be. In doing this, we truly affirm when we pray: "Thy will be done and Thy kingdom come on earth and into our lives, and let all power and glory be yours forever and ever". Therefore, Jesus, through this prayer, teaches us to reclaim that sense of vulnerability not as weakness but as strength, a moral freedom and spiritual maturity, to make a statement that you are truly and correctly human in the way God intended and created you. God's reign will surely come and God's will surely be done, when we as individuals, families, communities and nations see ourselves as responsible towards one another, feel that we need of each other, and hold ourselves accountable to one another. And that is the virtue of vulnerability that we are called to embrace. Amen

Deenabandhu Manchala is WCC programme executive for Migration and Just and Inclusive Communities
