Embodying Forgiveness

L Gregory Jones

pathways

INTRODUCING PATHWAYS

The situation in Northern Ireland raises many difficult—sometimes controversial—issues for Christians. However, we believe that God's people need to engage with his word and with the community.

In another situation that raised many difficult and controversial matters, the prophet Jeremiah called on God's people to search for the ancient path—the good way—and to walk in it. This series of PATHWAYS booklets is our contribution to that search for our time.

We invite others to join with us in understanding God's word to Northern Ireland.

This booklet, *Embodying Forgiveness*, contains the text of a talk given by Professor Greg Jones at ECONI's annual conference in 2001.

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EMBODYING FORGIVENESS

L Gregory Jones

My aim in these lectures is twofold: I want to present an overview of some of the theological judgments in scripture about forgiveness and I want to suggest why I think it is the task of the church to learn how to develop the habits of practicing forgiveness.

My own work on forgiveness goes back to the work that I had done earlier on the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In both *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer was wrestling with the question of why the church had been so weak and unable to deal with the threat of the Nazis and why so few people had resisted. He came to the notion of cheap grace and the contrast between cheap grace and costly grace. Cheap grace for Bonhoeffer is the assumption that everything that happens in the church's life happens in one hour on Sunday morning and thus doesn't have any implications for the rest of the week. It is forgiveness without any presumption of repentance; it is baptism without any sense of confession leading to Eucharist. It is the ways in which the church has accommodated forgiveness to just something that is declared in the context of worship, not something that needs to be lived. Bonhoeffer contrasted that with a costly sense of discipleship.

As I pondered Bonhoeffer's work, I began to realise that part of the issue for the church was a deeper problem, relating to a deeper understanding of who God is, and whether or not we believe God is really at work in the world, in terms of how we

worship and how we live. In many ways one of the fundamental problems that we have is a functional or a practical atheism: While we may profess to believe in God, we act as if we could create our own image of God to conform to what we most desire. We live our day-to-day lives as if God doesn't exist.

I want to take a few moments and rehearse for you a bit of my own understanding of who God is and how God is engaged in the world, as we see that unfold in scripture—a brief biblical theology—and then we'll look at how that is articulated in some of the challenges that face us in our thinking and living out of forgiveness.

In the beginning there was God. The God who creates, creates not because he has to, but because he wants to. God is at heart Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and a living relationship of love. And it is out of that love—that overflowing love that is the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit—that the world is created. In the process of that creation, he creates a world and human beings with whom he intends to live in communion.

Unfortunately, we were not content with that, and so with Adam and Eve, in the eating of the fruit of the tree, we see the collapse of that communion into a world of competing individuals, each asserting his or her own claim to identity over and against the other. Before they eat of the fruit of the tree, they use the language of communion: 'we,' 'our' and 'us.' Afterward, they get into the blame game: 'She did it,' 'The serpent did it.' And from then on, the story is about the assertion and the competition of self-enclosed individuals. The language of 'I' begins to predominate.

In many ways, I think you can tell the scriptural story of human sinfulness in the language of a two-year-old: 'me,' 'mine' and 'no.' Much of scripture is a story of God continuing to say 'Yes'—of God wanting and willing communion with us his creatures and with all creation—and human beings saying, 'No,' 'What's in it for me?' and 'Is it mine?' The fracturing and the fragmentation continues and worsens and deteriorates until the world is fragmented into so many little pieces that we are unable even to recognise the depth of that fragmentation, much less to be able to heal it ourselves. Forgiveness at its heart is the means by which God's love moves toward restoring communion, toward reconciliation in the wake of sin and evil. God continues to reach out saying, 'Yes' in the wake of humanity saying, 'No.'

It occurs throughout scripture: God sends the rainbow as a sign of the covenant; humanity says, 'No' and builds the Tower of Babel. God calls Abram and says, 'I'm going to send you forth. I want you to be a people, a light unto the nations, a city on the hill.' Abram promptly responds by trying to pass off his wife as his sister in order to save himself. God saves the Israelites from slavery, and they complain in the wilderness.

Then you get to one of my favourite stories in the book of Numbers. Moses sends out twelve spies to see the Promised Land. Ten spies come back with the majority report: 'We can't go forward. Yes, it's a land flowing with milk and honey, but there are too many obstacles. There are creatures up there who look like giants. We'd better not try it. We'd better go back to Egypt.' Only two of the twelve say, 'It is a land flowing with milk and honey, and if it is God who is leading us there, we ought to trust in God and go

forward.' The people respond by saying, 'Let's go back to Egypt.' Now remember what Egypt was. Egypt was suffering; Egypt was slavery; Egypt was oppression.

Egypt was also familiar. My father, who was a Methodist pastor all his life, said he'd never been a part of a church that didn't have a Back-to-Egypt committee. But the truth of the matter is I've never met a person, myself included, who didn't have a Back-to-Egypt part of their soul, who—when we face the real God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Miriam and Moses, the God of Jesus and Paul—didn't shrink back a little bit, even within the church, and say, 'I'm not sure about that. How about going back to Egypt,' because it was familiar. It is a sign of brokenness, of fragmentation, of sin, that all too often people are more ready to live in the brokenness and the division of the past because it's familiar than to risk the vulnerability of a future God is calling us to.

The story of God saying, 'Yes' continues in a beautiful passage in Hosea. God is struggling with whether to give up on his people who keep saying, 'No.' At the beginning of chapter 11, God actually describes Israel like a two-year-old. He says, "The more I called you, the more you ran from me." "But how can I give you up?" God says. "How can I abandon you, my child? I will not execute my fierce anger, for I am God and no mortal."

God continues to reach out, and that culminates in the gift of his own Son, Jesus Christ, sent among us proclaiming that the kingdom is at hand, proclaiming love. Too often we interpret that love as cheap and sentimental. How is it that someone proclaiming love ends up on a cross unless it's a love that calls us to look at the

Promised Land instead of going back to Egypt? All of us have to recognise our own complicity in the crucifixion of Christ. It is only because of our having been forgiven by Christ that we know how to live as the body of Christ, the church. Yet we would rather push him out of the world than risk the kind of love he offers. The first word about our life as Christians in our confrontation with Christ is not our saying, 'It's great to have you with us!' but rather, "Is it I, Lord?" But even after we push Christ out, even after we decide that we would rather not have him in the world than risk the love that he comes proclaiming, the kingdom that he comes embodying, God says 'Yes' one more time in the resurrection on Easter.

Now it's important to recognise that Easter is not about un-crucifying Christ. It's not about forgetting the past. It's about redeeming the past. There is a crucial difference between worshipping Christ un-crucified and worshipping Christ crucified and risen. He comes bearing the marks of the nails. The risen Christ returns with a judgment that does not condemn but offers grace, offers forgiveness, even to those who crucified him. And so it is that God's definitive word—even in the face of it being rejected by humanity—is 'Yes.'

The sending of the Holy Spirit, then, is to make all things new - to conform us to Christ, as the body of Christ; to unlearn all those habits of fragmentation and brokenness and division; to bear witness to the Spirit who is making all things new. 2 Corinthians 5:16-20 is a kind of Magna Carta for the church: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. If anyone is in Christ, there is a

new creation:[1] everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God."

Beautiful words, but rather daunting words—especially in contexts like Northern Ireland, where the brokenness is so visible and so clearly felt. Indeed, throughout the history of the church, these words are honoured more in our failure than in our faithfulness. Still we receive the command, "Be reconciled to God" because the message has been entrusted to us. It hasn't been entrusted to any one person, or only to the ministers, theologians, or leaders of the church. It's been entrusted to us, to all of us. So whether the message has credibility, whether the good news is seen and heard as good news depends on us. We're ambassadors for Christ. The ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted to us.

What would that entail? If, as I suggested earlier, the fragmentation is so pervasive that we can't even gather up all the little shards of glass with a broom, what does it mean to bear witness to Christ? What does it mean to say "There is a new creation"? What is involved in the ministry of reconciliation?

It involves unlearning the habits of sin, and learning habits of holiness. Those of us who come out of the evangelical Christian tradition have sometimes so stressed the moment of conversion that we've lost sight of the longer process of living a life. I heard

one preacher say, "I don't care how high someone jumps on the day of their conversion. I want to know how they walk once they land." One of the struggles for us as Christians is even after we want to will the good, we find ourselves unable to get there. If the brokenness and all the sinful, destructive habits of thinking in terms of 'me' and 'mine' and 'no' are entrenched in our lives, then it's going to take time for us to unlearn those habits and to learn the habits of holiness. The Spirit working in us and in the world can move us along sometimes miraculously fast. But in the midst of the brokenness and the pain and the division, it's often very slow.

How do we become ambassadors for Christ, ministers of the reconciliation that has been entrusted to us? In the first place, we have to unlearn our habits of thinking and living like Jonah. Jonah haunts me, and ought to haunt all of us, because many of us are caught by Jonah's predicament: he's got God right, but that has no consequences for how he lives. Jonah gets a very clear message from God, "Go to Nineveh and preach," but Jonah says, 'No' and goes Tarshish, where it's safe. Jonah only really gets his understanding of what God is calling him to do when he is desperate in the belly of the big fish. So he goes to Nineveh where he's called to preach to his enemies. His enemies repent. And he's unhappy about it.

Jonah is a good theologian: he's got his doctrine right. In the fourth chapter he describes God in terms that are at the very heart of the Old Testament. He says, "I knew that you are a God slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, full of mercy and ready to relent from punishment." He says this in tones of reluctance. He's saying, 'I know that that's the kind of God you are, and that's why I'm

miserable and pouting, because I don't want you to forgive my enemies. A God who serves my self-interest is fine, but a God who serves God's interest of restoring all of his creation to communion, of using forgiveness as a means to the reconciliation of all creation—I don't want that.' He's got his theology right; he's got his life wrong.

It's one of the strangest and yet most wonderful books in all of scripture, as relevant today as it was then. And it's a daunting book of scripture, in part because of how it ends. Its ending makes it clear that the Ninevites weren't forgiven because they were good people and Jonah just hadn't seen their fundamental goodness. God himself says, "These people don't know their left hand from their right." And yet this is precisely who God is and what God does. It's what I meant when I talked about our practical atheism. Even when we get our doctrine right, we want to live in a way that presumes God is different than God is. Jonah is going to have to give up being defined by what he hates and learn to be defined by who he loves.

There's a story of two shopkeepers who hated one another. They defined themselves over and against one another by their hatred, by their division, by their dislike of one another. An angel of the Lord came to one of the shopkeepers and said, 'The Lord has sent me to you to grant you one wish. Whatever it is that you would like will be granted unto you.' The shopkeeper said, 'Great!' 'There's one catch,' the angel said. 'Whatever you receive, your hated enemy will receive twofold.' The shopkeeper pondered it for a while, and then he said, 'My wish is that you would strike me blind in one eye.'

If your enemy is going to get twice as much, you'd rather

inflict harm on yourself to prevent them from getting ahead. It's a cautionary tale about how often we define ourselves more by what we hate than who and what we love. But if we can overcome the temptation of Jonah, and truly begin to live in relation to the God of Jesus Christ, seeking to become ambassadors for Christ, ministers of the reconciliation that has been entrusted to us, then how do we live?

We will live by learning the habits of holiness, by practicing forgiveness day by day. C S Lewis, in one of his letters on prayer, puts it in a stark context. He says, "Last night, while at prayer, I finally discovered that I had forgiven someone after thirty years of praying and trying that I might." Someone as saintly as C S Lewis had to struggle toward forgiveness—thirty years.

Forgiveness is a way of life that takes time. It encompasses words spoken and unspoken, emotions felt and overcome, and actions offered and refused—all three in a complex interrelation, and you can't presume that only one of the three is sufficient. It's a way of life.

One of the challenges when we think about forgiveness is that we have too often collapsed it into a question of whether words have been said or not said. It's a kind of thumbs up or thumbs down momentary event, when that may not be what's going on at all. Sometimes the right words may be there, but they may not be aligned with the emotions or actions. Sometimes the words are a crucial public avowal of an intent to struggle toward reconciliation, but we can't by any means presume that the fullness of forgiveness is there simply because the words have been spoken.

Sometimes the words have a hard time coming in any way—maybe because you don't want to take that risk, maybe because you're the kind of person who just doesn't say much. I've seen in many relationships the opportunity for forgiveness lost by missing cues that are expressed in little gestures when no words have been offered. In other situations divisions have been maintained simply because someone was determined to wait forever to hear the words, while the other person was never going to be able to speak them, even though the emotions and the actions had changed significantly. Sometimes it's the emotions that need to thaw before the words can happen, before actions can be offered, but the pain is so real it's too risky to say anything or do anything.

Emotions can be overcome, but emotions are also appropriate. Anger is appropriate. I don't know when we started describing anger only as one of the deadly sins. But the book of Ephesians has a very important distinction: "Be angry, but do not sin." Anger is an appropriate expression at outrage, at injustice, at brokenness and at the terrible things that happen. It's what gives voice to the prophets of the Old Testament. But it nonetheless needs to be overcome because that anger can too easily be indulged in a way that leads to bitterness, that closes off the soul.

Forgiveness involves the refusal to engage in the actions of vengeance. No matter how appropriately felt, no matter what words might have been spoken, they refuse those actions of vengeance, or even the actions that simply express an outrage that can't find any other means of outlet. Forgiveness also offers gestures as ancient as the kiss of peace or the handshake as a sign that there was no weapon in the right hand. Gestures were signs that

opened doors, indicating that reconciliation might be possible.

In any of these contexts, the words, the emotions, or the actions may begin or lead a process. A lot has to do with the worship of our churches. For instance, I had a rather significant conflict with a woman in the church. One morning she sat next to me. Prior to Communion, the worship leader was about to say, "As forgiven and reconciled people, let us offer gestures of forgiveness and reconciliation to one another, saying, 'The peace of Christ be with you.'" Now if you get advance notice that this is going to happen, you can chart out who you're going to go to and who you're going to avoid. But because I hadn't been paying attention, I didn't plan that out, and I stood up and this woman was the only person within about two miles of me. So we turned to one another and we embraced. No words came. The emotions in my gut were roiling all around because of the conflict between us. I knew things she had said about me, done to me. I hadn't been very charitable toward her, to say the least. But in the context of that embrace in church in preparation for coming to Communion, the door was opened, and all I could say was, "We ought to talk."

It begins a process. It may take thirty years; it may take a lifetime. In the most bitter divisions, it may be only the eschatological hope that promises an outcome. And yet, the injunction is there: we are to be ambassadors for Christ, ministers of the reconciliation that has been entrusted to us. It is words; it is emotions; it is actions—it is all of these in a complicated interrelationship, it is a way of life.

I want to suggest rather paradoxically that often forgiveness as a way of life is discovered rather than willed. Sometimes when

we try the hardest, we find ourselves frustrated by not getting farther. But in scripture we see a glimpse of how forgiveness can be discovered as a way of life in the midst of other practices of Christian community[2] as in James 5:12-16: "Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

It's a rather remarkable conjunction of activities in five short verses. What would it mean for us in the church to have our 'Yes' be yes and our 'No' be no? That's crucial if you're going to be singing together, if you're going to be praying together, if you're going to be confessing—it had better be transparent. And that's not easy. The passage talks about anointing and healing and confessing. What is striking in this set of verses is that forgiveness is the only thing listed in the passive tense. It doesn't say, 'Go about forgiving.' It says that in the context of this community life, when you learn what it means to pray for one another, what it means to sing with one another, what it means to seek to heal one another, what it means to anoint one another, to confess with one another—in that way of life, you'll discover forgiveness.

Let me offer two illustrations of that. One has to do with healing, the healing of our bodies and the forgiveness our souls so desperately need. Jesus knew that they were connected. He wanted to loosen that connection where forgiveness and healing were drawn too closely together: sin and sickness aren't identical, but neither are they unrelated. And in situations at the end of life, two of the most important phrases that can be expressed to one another are 'Please forgive me' and 'I forgive you.' Our bodies and our souls need those interrelations for healing.

The second illustration is of the importance of singing. The letter to the Ephesians talks about singing songs of praise as a kind of intoxication, something that transcends reason, something that draws people together. Let me suggest a context outside of forgiveness where singing was powerful in a super-rational way. My father died of a heart attack when he was fifty-three. It was very sad and difficult because none of us had anticipated it; he'd been very healthy. I felt betrayed. I was angry. I wasn't sure if there was a God—and if there was, if that was good news. How could God take my father, or allow him to die at such a young age? I was confused. I was frustrated. I didn't really want to go to the funeral.

My mom had served as a choir director, and sixty people turned out to sing in a choir as part of the funeral service. Unbeknownst to me or anyone, the choir had decided they were going to conclude the service with the Hallelujah Chorus. When they started to sing, I was mad. Those were not the words, that was not the music that fitted my mood. But then, my brother tells me, he saw my body start to straighten itself out, and I actually started to stand on tiptoes. And then my sister noticed that I actually started

singing. It didn't fit my mood, but the choir singing when I couldn't sing began to touch me in a way deeper than my mind was willing to permit me to go. It was a powerful experience.

A couple of years ago, it was the Hallelujah Chorus that compelled me to turn to someone a few rows in front from whom I'd been divided, and to begin a process of seeking his forgiveness. And last Christmas, I saw a woman whose son had been killed six months earlier. She told me she couldn't go to her church anymore because it was only filled with people who wanted to be happy and couldn't allow her to be angry and grieving. She came to our church on Christmas Eve, and I saw her up in the choir. She'd joined them that evening because she wanted to sing the Hallelujah Chorus. And in the context of that singing, I saw the colour return to her cheeks, the sparkle return to her eyes in a way that I didn't see in everyday life.

Now I'm not suggesting that singing that one time made all the difference in the world, but it provided a glimpse of hope that the church can live together with holiness of heart and life. It begins the process of unlearning sin and bearing witness to the God who is "abounding in steadfast love," who is "slow to anger," who is "full of mercy and ready to relent from punishing," who asks of us our repentance, that we seek to be a forgiven and forgiving people. Who asks that, perhaps, in this way of life as a community, we might engage in the kinds of practices that make forgiveness possible.

I want now to grapple with two of the more difficult aspects of the issue of forgiveness: the question of repentance and

the question of memory. I want to touch on both of them because I think they cut to the core of the struggles and the questions that we face.

In the pivotal moment in the story of the gospels, Peter comes to Jesus and says, "How many times should I forgive my brother or my sister? As many as seven times?" When Peter asks that question, it's as if he's as proud as punch of his extraordinary character and of all the learning that he's done. He expects Jesus to say, 'Most people have a hard time getting up to one or two, and if you're willing to go to seven—good job, Peter!' But Jesus says, "I say to you, seventy times seven." Jesus is saying, 'Go on doing it indefinitely.'

Think about it in the context of our lives: Forgiving once—maybe; twice—that's a struggle; three times—you must take me for a fool. We need to pause and think about what Jesus is really saying. I referred to it earlier in saying that forgiveness is a way of life, not simply a moment. It's a way of life of unlearning sin, generally, but it's also got particular instances, particular relationships, particular contexts and particular situations. When Jesus says you must forgive your brother or sister seventy times seven he's situating it in a way of life, of what it means to learn to live in God's kingdom. Part of the difficulty that that seems to be reflecting is that neither our repentance nor the repentance we expect from others is ever adequate, particularly in the first instance.

One of the difficulties that we're going to wrestle with in the context of memory is one of the worst phrases ever invented in the history of humanity: 'Forgive and forget.' One of the things 'forgive and forget' presumes is that the struggle is always with what it

means to forgive someone else, not of my need to be forgiven. To genuinely be forgiven by God or by others involves risk because it involves my willingness to acknowledge what I have done, and thus also to begin to take steps of repentance.

In Matthew 7 are those words that we often rip out of context: "Judge not, lest you be judged." We don't read much further, "For the judgment you give will be the judgment that you receive. You hypocrites! Why do you notice the speck in your brother or sister's eye, but not the log in your own eye?" The temptation to self-righteousness, to sitting in judgment, is at the heart of what Jesus is talking about there—what makes forgiveness so daunting. We sit in judgment and say, 'If the rest of the world were like me, the world would be a better place.' We sit in smug self-righteousness and say, 'The trouble is how hard it is to forgive all those wretches that don't know how to live,' when at the heart of the gospel is our capacity to ask, "Is it I, Lord?" What is my complicity in the most horrifying act ever in the history of humanity—the crucifixion of God's own Son?

So when we come to the question of forgiveness and repentance, what we need to acknowledge first is our own need for repentance. No matter what has happened or what has been done to us, or what we have done to others, none of us is ever just a pure victim. There is only one person in the history of the world who qualifies as a pure victim because he was sinless, namely Jesus. Now that's not to say that therefore we're all equally sinners. But it is to suggest that these are always relative distinctions, and that we all have the capacity to reflect on our own need for repentance. Otherwise, we see the cycles of violence: the memory of having been

sinned against becomes the source for mobilising new political vengeance—whether in South Africa, where the Afrikaners, with their complaints against the British, still have memories of being victims, despite what they then did to black South Africans; or in the Middles East, where it is the memories of the Holocaust and centuries of anti-Semitism that have now fuelled Israeli injustice against Palestinians. So, we need to reflect on our need for repentance.

But is forgiveness conditional upon the other person repenting? I want to say, 'no,' and then qualify what I mean by that. I say, 'no' because I think insofar as we have a propensity as human beings toward hatred and especially toward morally justifying that hatred, making forgiveness conditional upon anything will defer it endlessly. It is easy to come up with a list of requirements for the other person in order to adequately repent and then to add a couple more things to the bottom of the list as time goes on. It never quite measures up.

Forgiveness is unconditional. But one cannot receive forgiveness without engaging in repentance. This goes back to the notion of a way of life. It takes time to achieve the fullness of forgiveness—thirty years, a lifetime, and in the course of a people, perhaps generations or centuries. The fullness of forgiveness will require repentance, but gestures of forgiveness can never be conditional upon it.

I say that for a couple of reasons. One has to do with the propensities toward hatred or also the capacities for bitterness to destroy our own soul. In Sister Helen Prejean's book, Dead Man Walking, are two stories of fathers. I'll come back to the first father.

But the second father's daughter was brutally murdered by a despicable man with not a shred of repentance. He spits on the father during a hearing, curses him, and does everything to make life as miserable as possible for the father. And so—whatever your feelings about the death penalty—you're sympathetic to the father's anger, his outrage, his frustration. After he watched his daughter's murderer be executed, he said, "I hoped it was going to make me feel better, but it didn't. I just feel somehow empty." A couple years after that he said, "I have become a hollow shell of the man I once was." The bitterness had eaten away at his own soul to a point that, despite legitimate feelings of anger and outrage and bitterness, he had "become a hollow shell" of the person he once was. That's part of the problem.

The other problem has to do with the ways in which, if we don't recognise forgiveness as always there, we'll miss signs for possibilities of repentance. Repentance rarely happens all at once. That's part of the struggle that we have. If we want someone else to change, to convert, to repent, we want it all by tomorrow. When it's my repentance that's involved, I've got a ten-year plan. And even when I'm genuine, there's backsliding—it's going to take time. But someone else wants it overnight. It doesn't happen that way very often. And so we need to be able to keep the spaces opening for those initial gestures of repentance that may be so subtle we might miss them. It's almost like playing hide and seek. You know, when you'd go hide, you always wanted the best hiding place. But you didn't want to find such a good hiding place that no one would ever find you. So you'd stick a toe out, hoping that maybe they'd notice you. That's the kind of way in which gestures of repentance begin.

On the path of forgiveness—that takes time, that is a way of life—in the absence of repentance, when there cannot be the fullness of forgiveness, we are called to the practice of loving enemies. There is the morally crucial recognition that there are enemies. Sometimes we make Christianity into just being nice; we make God into some cosmic nice guy. But Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." I cannot pretend that the other really wishes me well, that somewhere deep down inside, it's just their bad intentions. I've heard people make these kind of excuses: 'Hitler just had a bad upbringing.' Elie Wiesel talks about how the Jews were too naïve in thinking that when the Germans started rounding up their children, they were actually starting a kindergarten. We want to think the best of others, but it's important to recognise that there are others who, in the absence of repentance, intend harm. But the question then becomes what do I do with them? And Jesus says we learn to love them.

Now I don't in the first instance want to suggest that that's easy. We sometimes throw the line around in church or in sermons, "Love your enemies" without recognising what a morally significant and challenging injunction that is. A Welsh poet puts it this way: "Forgiveness isn't all that difficult. It's just walking through thorns to stand by your enemy's side." It's painful. What does it mean to love one's enemy, to actually be able to pray for them, to wish them well? It may take several years—take C S Lewis' experience—to be able even to lift them up in prayer. It's one of the reasons why the church has practices of intercessory prayer—there may be times where others pray for the person when I can't bring myself to that point. I knew a woman who had been raped. She wanted the

person who had raped her to go to hell, literally, and I understood that. But then, after a lecture, she said to me, “Will you pray for him for me?” And I said, “Yes I will.” She came back in a couple weeks and said, “Are you still praying for him?” I said, “Yes.” She came back a couple weeks later and said, “Are you still praying?” I began to think God was sending her just to reform my prayer life. But she kept asking if I was praying for him on her behalf. Was the church praying for him? And after about a year, she said, “Well, I am too.” I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “I don't know what I mean. I just call out his name in prayer. I'm not sure I want him to go to hell anymore. I just don't want to have anything to do with him.” A rather remarkable achievement that I think has a lot to do with that notion of loving enemies, because I could tell the thaw in her own heart. In her life, growth and healing was occurring.

Loving enemies is a part of the whole dynamic of forgiveness. In the complete absence of repentance, we need to acknowledge the other is an enemy. But we ought also to beware of ever identifying him or her or them wholly as enemies, because then we lose the humanity and lose the openings that might make forgiveness and reconciliation in their fullness possible.

Now I say all that fully recognising that in this life, what Paul talks about as hoping against hope may be what we're looking for. All the signs and evidences in this life are of not much hope. But then again miracles do happen, and we need to keep ourselves open to those miracles. After all, in 1986, who would've thought that a few short years later the Berlin Wall would have come down, and that in South Africa there would have been a peaceful transition to democracy with black majority rule?

Repentance is necessary for the fullness of forgiveness, but we can't ever make it the prerequisite, because then forgiveness will be endlessly deferred. Loving enemies may not seem like all that we hope for, but it's a crucial part of the path of forgiveness and a faithful witness to what it means to have a ministry of reconciliation that takes sin and wrongdoing seriously.

Part of the difficulty that we have with forgiveness and repentance—how we deal with Jesus' "seventy times seven" instruction to keep it as a way of life that is always available—is precisely because of the complexity of our memories. When we ask the question 'Can the past be forgiven?' part of what we're asking is, particularly in the absence of repentance. But in the deeper levels of our lives, we ask that question even when the other or others repent. Can the past really be forgiven? Let me cut to the chase with a statement that will tell you what I think the answer to that is: The only way the past can ever be the past is through forgiveness. So part of the question is 'Can the past ever really be the past, or is it always condemned to haunt the present and the future?' I said earlier that the phrase 'forgive and forget' is one of the worst phrases ever invented. I'd put fairly close up with that, 'Time heals all wounds.'

The problem of 'forgive and forget' is threefold. In the first case, it's psychologically burdensome and impossible. In the second case, it's morally difficult and problematic. And in the third case, it's theologically unfaithful. The psychological difficulty has to do with the fact that it is not possible for us to control what we remember and what we forget. And so when people have that image 'forgive and forget' as part of what they think they have to do, they think it's impossible to forgive if they can't forget. It creates a tremendous

psychological burden on people.

Morally it is difficult and problematic because, as Santayana said, "Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it." It also loses the capacity to reflect on whether this was a one-time offence or a regular pattern that has been lived over time. C S Lewis also said he would find it easier to forgive one murder than a whole series of accumulated offences over a number of years. So it's morally difficult to talk about forgetting. The moral difficulty also is bound up with the psychological difficulty in another way, namely that to forget something in the past may require forgetting the person to whom it happened. If that's how they died, for example, then to forget how they died would mean to forget them in a crucial way.

The theological difficulty I mentioned earlier. It means that we end up worshipping Christ un-crucified rather than Christ crucified and risen. The risen Christ doesn't come to ask us to forget the past but to allow it to be redeemed.

How do we then deal with the issues of forgiveness in relation to memory—whether we can genuinely find the healing of the memories, or we're so haunted by the wounds of memory that there's no way to go forward? Part of the difficulty has to do with the fact that our memories are so unpredictable. If they weren't unpredictable, there wouldn't be the endless search for car keys. Partly just by way of psychological makeup, we can't remember everything of what we perceive—a selectivity of perception. But also there are the kind of neurological differences both for young children who haven't developed the capacity for memory, and in older age, as the painful realisation of Alzheimer's graphically

illustrates, it's often difficult to remember because of the way the brain atrophies and deteriorates.[3] We can't control our memories. We remember some things that we wish we'd forget; we forget things we wish remember.

In scripture you find places indeed where forgetting is linked to sin. Israel forgets God and so commits sin. Think about sinful practices. In the midst of adultery, it is the spouse who forgets the spouse. Or in the course of betrayal, the friend forgets the friend. And so there is a danger in linking forgiving to forgetting, because forgetting is often linked to sin.

But the more difficult problem is not of forgetting too easily, but of being haunted by too traumatic a memory or series of memories. And the question is, is there any way for them to be redeemed, or do we have to find some way to will their absence to try to move on? An Israeli man named Amos Élon, reflecting on the problems of the Middle East about a half a decade ago, says, "I have lived in Israel most of my life and have come to the conclusion that where there is so much traumatic memory, so much pain, so much memory innocently or deliberately mobilised for political purposes,[4] a little forgetfulness might finally be in order. This should not be seen as a banal plea to forgive and forget. Forgiveness has nothing to do with it. While remembrance is often a form of vengeance, it is also paradoxically the basis of reconciliation. What is needed, in my view," he writes, "is a shift in emphasis and proportion, and a new equilibrium in Israeli political life between memory and hope." Powerful words.

I want to suggest that there is something powerful to what Élon is talking about in that "so much traumatic memory," but that

ultimately forgiveness has everything to do with it. That in moving from vengeance to reconciliation, we can't bypass the reality and the difficulty of grappling with forgiveness in relation to memory.

I want to first identify and try to disentangle five different ways in which memories haunt us. I think they influence us in different ways, and, to be sure, in many situations people are haunted by a combination of these and perhaps all five.

The first is when there has been a single event which is so traumatic that it defines the horizons of the present and the future. A single event—a murder, a rape, a bomb dropping in one's community—that becomes so definitive that one doesn't know how to go on in any kind of significant way. Some people have suggested that September 11th is going to become that for a whole generation. The other father in Helen Prejean's Dead Man Walking, Lloyd LeBlanc, talks about how the discovery of his son's murder in the woods provided the event that marked everything else in his life. He said every day he had to relive that event and to relive the realisation that David would never be twenty, would never be twenty-five, would never bring his children over to see him. All of those things changed as a result of that decisive event.

The second kind of haunting memory is where it may not be one single event but a whole series of accumulated events. These may be traumatic individually as well, but they may not be. They could be something like the effects of lying—no single instance of which was horrifying in isolation, but accumulated over the course of years or decades has a cumulative effect that is so powerful. Repeated events over time, particularly the more horrifying each of them is, begin to have a powerful impact. This is part of the

difficulty with repeated abuse, whether it's physical or verbal or emotional.[5] Accumulated events begin to create scars on the body and even more traumatically on the soul.

When I was in high school, I was working at a catering service making hors d'oeuvres all day. I stood across from a woman whose life had been definitively marked at the intersection of both the first and second ways. She was a concentration camp survivor, and on her forearm was the number that she had had in the concentration camp. And I thought how that must haunt her every day to see that on her arm in a way that was so visible to her.

The third—particularly difficult in situations like Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East—is where the event may not have happened to me in particular as an individual, but it happened to 'my people' such that the traumatic memory haunts me as a member of a whole people. The effect is that the memory in my mind is not of something that I had happen to me so much as it is a memory that is out in the social and political atmosphere, that one becomes a part of by being identified with this or that people. This is part of what erupted in such horrible ways in the former Yugoslavia. Serbs and Croats had been next-door neighbours, hadn't done anything to one another, in fact their children had married each other. Then, all of a sudden, memories that go back 1500 years erupted overnight and mobilised responses. Nothing had happened to them as individuals until it erupted in a new context. The prior horrors of a broader culture haunt the present.

The fourth shifts the tables a bit because it's not the memories of what has been done to me or to my people, us, but rather it

is the searing memories of what I have done. This is the case for the perpetrators who find it difficult to imagine a possibility of forgiveness and going on to live because what I have done is so horrifying. The most graphic example that I know of is Alfred Speer, Hitler's minister of architects, architect of the concentration camp.[6] Speer wanted to repent and he tried. Indeed when he was in Spandau prison he had a confessor who had studied with Karl Barth and who had him reading Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. Speer was working toward repenting, but he could never acknowledge the fullness of what he had done. Speer concluded he could not confess what he had done and still have a future. And so he didn't up until the day he died.

The fifth and final version of this is the haunting by the memories not of what I did as a perpetrator, but of what my child or spouse or very close loved one did. In the case of my close friend, it was the horrors of having to come to terms with the fact that she discovered her son had raped and murdered several people. She wondered whether she could go on living. Those memories had become her memories and were haunting her in trying to understand whether there was any way to go forward.

As I suggested before, these five intersect in a variety of ways. People are often haunted by a combination of them, and broader cultures are haunted by all five in complicated and difficult ways. What they lead to is despair about whether the past can be forgiven, whether there can be any future, and indeed, in that sense, whether there can really truly be any vital sense of the present.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the main character is a woman named Sethe, a freed slave who is challenged by all of these differ-

ent kinds of memories. She'd been victimised horribly, brutally beaten, raped, attacked. She finally escaped from slavery. When she sees four men described in apocalyptic terms coming back, she actually decides to kill her baby daughter rather than see any of them taken back to slavery. It works: they decide they don't want to deal with a crazy woman, so they don't take her. Yet she's condemned to living on the margins because none of the black community wants to deal with a woman who would kill her own child. So she's haunted.

The narrator says, "It was never too early to start the day's work of beating back the past." That's how the narrator describes her whole life: a day-by-day "beating back the past." The narrator also tells us that Paul D., another freed slave whose life has been traumatised by the past, has a tobacco tin in his chest where a beating heart used to be, its lid rusted shut—a graphic description of a sense that there wasn't much life going on. At the end of the novel, Paul D. says, "Sethe, me and you, we got more yesterday than anyone. What we need is some kind of tomorrow." Well, having "more yesterday than anyone" is a way of describing the complex of memories haunting the present. The search for tomorrow is a search for a way to let the past be the past.

Contrary to Élon, I think forgiveness has everything to do with it. I want very briefly to describe how I think forgiveness has everything to do with it, in relation both to Miroslav Volf's book *Exclusion and Embrace* and to some very concrete practices of the church.

Miroslav Volf talks about the logic of forgetting. But he talks about it in a more powerful way in the context of what he de-

scribes as a divine act of non-remembrance. I want to suggest that at the heart of the work of Christ crucified and risen is a process of healing; that as we locate our memories in the wounds of Christ, we begin a process of living into the future defined by Christ that reshapes and disciplines and orients our memory. Élon is right that a little forgetfulness could help. But it's not a willed forgetfulness. It is the dramatic sense that the worst things that have happened to us or that we have done can recede into non-remembrance as a divine gift.

Now that's daunting to say in any context. But here's what I mean. When we think eschatologically about the lamb who was slain, and when we look at the vision in Revelation of not Christ un-crucified but of Christ crucified and risen and of the saints and martyrs whose robes have been washed in the blood of the lamb—it is a vision of the wounds healing to a point of perfection where in the completion and the fullness of creation, our joy will be complete because sin will have been fully healed. And strange as it may seem to say, the past will have receded to a point where we no longer need to remember it. Even the worst forms of sin will have become like those minor injuries that heal over until we no longer pay attention to them.

But that's an eschatological realisation. In this life, we are called not to forget but to remember differently. What God's gift in Christ does is enable us to be freed from the burden of the past as a broken past, to see it as a redeemed past. That takes time to begin to do. It's linked to repentance and the capacity for change. Forgiveness does not look only backward to the healing of the past; it looks forward to the changed and different ways of living into the

future. So forgiveness is also linked to holiness and the call of a different life, but it is about a redeeming of the past. So Peter on the sight of the resurrection can recall his betrayal of Christ truthfully because it's set in a different context. Israel can remember its history in the exile because it's now set in the context of a different relationship. Freed from the burden of the past, we can begin the complicated, difficult process of reclaiming and redeeming the past, because that is what God in Christ is all about. It is a difficult and complicated process because of the layers of trauma and suffering and because of the ambiguities and complexities of memory, but it's an important and crucial task nonetheless.

Well, how might we go about doing that? I want to suggest that the resources are much deeper and richer in the church's life than we sometimes pay attention to, because a lot of it has to do with the disciplining of our memory as we in engage in the worship of the church. Through studying scripture we begin to shape the memory as we let those words work their way into our minds and our lives—what the early and medieval church would talk about as chewing on scripture, digesting it and making it a part of the fabric of our lives. Through the celebration of Communion, we remember Jesus' death and resurrection, and in a fundamental way are re-membered as the body of Christ. In a variety of ways the church's liturgy schools us as a people in a different kind of memory than is available in the broader culture and the broader political and economic dimensions of the world. The church is also shaped by different dynamics of friendships that cross over lines where we begin to listen to the different kinds of stories of one another.

There are other kinds of dynamics. We could talk about how

singing and hospitality and other practices of the church are engaged in the redemption of memory and the re-schooling of our lives as a people of memory. In my own context, I would say that the African American tradition has offered the church an incredible blessing in the spirituals, which have some of the most beautiful recollections of the past in all of its pain and difficulty. The Psalms, in their brutal honesty, openness, and engagement with God, are there for all of us when we are struggling to find any words to say. One of my colleagues said, "The Psalms were mostly written in times of horrifying conflict and cataclysmic upheaval. They probably have some good time-tested words." In the wake of September 11th, a group of us have been praying them with some regularity. A friend of mind told me that her father has prayed six Psalms every day for the last forty years. That means every twenty-five days, he's going through the Psalms again. I suspect he has different way of remembering and a different way of living into the present and the future than the rest of us.

These are difficult issues and yet the call of the gospel—the call to be ambassadors for Christ and ministers of reconciliation—is still given to us not as an option but as a responsibility of our own forgiveness by God in Christ.

The image I want to leave you with comes from my middle son, Benjamin. My wife was putting Benjamin to bed one night, and at the end of the story and the prayer, she kissed him goodnight. As she leaned back up off the bed, he pulled her back down by her cheeks. He kissed her four times down on the forehead and three times across, and he said, "Mom, you are blessed." This was not our normal bedtime ritual for our eight-year-old child. Susan was

shocked and puzzled for a moment and then she realised what had happened. She said, "Benjamin, do you realise that you just kissed me on the forehead in the form of a cross?" And he said, "Yep, I planned it that way." Susan regained her bearings, thanked him for that, came downstairs, her eyes rather large, and she said, "You'll never believe what I just had happen to me." She told me the story, and I couldn't quite figure out what had happened, but was grateful nonetheless.

The next day we asked Benjamin where he'd gotten the idea for offering kisses in the form of a cross on the forehead. He began to talk about how earlier that year we had gathered at church. He'd come down the centre aisle and the minister had invited him to remember his baptism by putting water in the form of a cross on his forehead and said, "Remember your baptism and be thankful." And how just a couple of weeks earlier, he had gone back to church on Ash Wednesday and come down the centre aisle and the minister had put ashes on his forehead and said, "Repent and believe in the gospel." And with the creativity that only a young child would come up with, he had adapted that into a blessing of offering kisses in the form of a cross.

In a broken and hurting world, we're called to be ambassadors for Christ, ministers of the reconciliation God has entrusted to us. To go forth to offer kisses in the form of a cross is not a bad way to live.

[1] Some English translations translate it, "If anyone is in Christ, *he* is a new creation." I think that's a bad reading of the Greek. It is "*there* is a new creation," and that has everything to do with whether salvation is individual or if it's broader than that. Salvation is individual by being incorporated into the world that God has created and redeemed and destined for us.

[2] This was at the heart of Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*. The brokenness within that community was real because he talks about daily confession, but it's the last chapter of the book. Earlier in the book, there are chapters about reading scripture, prayer, eating together, and singing. Those are practices that set an appropriate context for forgiveness.

[3] My colleague at Duke, David Keck, has written a beautiful book, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, about the love of God and Alzheimer's disease.

[4] A friend of mine told of a visit to Israel. He was being taken around by an Israeli friend who pointed to the side and said, "That's where we fought the decisive battle that finally won." My friend, trying to figure out the reference, said, "Were you talking about the 1967 or 1948?" The man looked back at him and said, "No, I was talking about the Maccabees, 200 BCE." Memories get carried on for centuries to be mobilised for political purposes today.

[5] Several years ago, Simon Herrach, a Jesuit in America, had an essay in *Modern Theology* looking at the effects of child abuse in terms of the soul. It unpacks the way the habits of abuse become difficult to deal with even if or after the beatings have stopped, because that cumulative force over time, that imprinting on the soul or the body, then haunts the capacity to move forward.

[6] See Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth.*

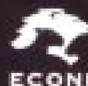
Embodying Forgiveness

L Gregory Jones

Forgiveness is a way of life that takes time, argues Greg Jones. Far from being a matter of the moment or of words spoken or unspoken, forgiveness is a craft that requires that we unlearn the habits of sin and learn instead the habits of holiness in the community of the church.

L Gregory Jones is Dean and Professor of Theology at Duke Divinity School.

This is what the Lord says:
'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.'
Jeremiah 6.16



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