

bread for the journey

Forgiveness? Not Again!

I am not into dedicating meditations to anyone but I am into remembering people who matter over the long haul.

Dale White is someone I am going to remember for quite some time; he was one of the most unforgettable employees who ever worked at Rosecrance. Dale is the real deal when it comes to recovery; he is the real deal when it comes to standing by and walking with the people who seek help. We have been blessed by his friendship, his work and his presence with us. I was sad when I heard he was leaving to return to his native Iowa. He has been a good friend and competent colleague. Dale is the epitome of what AA is at the core. It is the fellowship. If recovering people understand this in their bones—that it is the fellowship—hope for their recovery grows exponentially. By leaps and bounds!

AA and its sibling, NA, stresses the importance of walking with one another, caring for one another, identifying with one another and affirming one another. This is fellowship, which is also the heart of authentic spirituality. We don't do this journey alone. We walk hand in hand. No one is an island unto themselves. We are unable to do "Life" on our own. Recovering people have come to accept one another, embrace one another and celebrate one another for who we are. Guilt is not welcome here. Judgment and condemnation can leave its guns of incrimination and insult at the door. To hell with judgment. And as for Shame—a pox on your house, you rotten old scoundrel.

We surely need each other to remind ourselves that we have made mistakes—horrendous mistakes. We hold each other

accountable for the lousy decisions we have made. No one will let us forget the people we have hurt along the way, people to whom we must make amends if our recovery is destined to be both authentic and lasting. Recovering people have the uncanny ability to call a spade a spade not a pitchfork when speaking of character defects. We can be crabby, egotistical, grandiose and talking-only-of-ourselves "idjits." We are among friends. We all wrestle with the same demons. We are a company of fools who happen to love each other. And so ...

... We don't throw anyone under the bus. No baby gets thrown out with the bath. There is no rejection here. We show up for our own excommunication and ostracism because there is only one mantra we abide by. It is this: "Keep comin' back, baby. We love you. You are one of us." This is the heart and soul of spirituality. This is the kind of stuff that lights the fires of motivation under our inglorious "behinds." Fear becomes irrelevant and passé in our little company of like-minded recovering people. We lean on each other. We rely upon one another. We feel safe here.

Forgiveness? What's that? Forgiveness is a tangential or peripheral religious concept. It's an abstraction—something that happens in our heads and hearts. Forgiveness is a religious category. It is a kind of control mechanism that is designed to keep its adherents subservient and dependent—and feeling good. Forgiveness is often used as a power trip for those who have the "authority" to wield it. Say the right stuff, repeat the right incantations, jump through the hoops, and make the appropriate sacrifices—and forgiveness is yours. That's what a religion of domination does. It offers forgiveness—*IF* ... we do the right stuff and make the proper confessional sounds in a timely manner.

I have said nothing damning about forgiveness. Not really. Who
(continued on back)

could speak against it? It's a specialty of any religion worth the trouble and the price of admission. As clergy persons, it is our stock in trade. We need to know that though our sins are red like crimson they shall be as white as snow. People need to know that God removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. We all need forgiveness—the declaration that we are all right in God's eyes and all right in the eyes of those we love, though so much of what we are and what we have done is all wrong. But I want to put forgiveness in its proper perspective.

Forgiveness is what God does unconsciously or off-handedly, or with his left hand as a kind of afterthought. The grace of forgiveness comes naturally to God because forgiveness is at the core of who God is. Forgiveness is the grace of God personified. But God's main mission or objective with us is fellowship with us. Friendship. Presence. Partnership. "Let us make man and woman in our image and partner with them." Forgiveness is ok as far as it goes but it is simply an abstract declaration: "I forgive you." It does not hold a candle to what God is to us and what we are to God: Friends Forever.

The Reverend John Buchanan of Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago tells us this story in the *Christian Century*, April 5, 2011. Jeanne Bishop is a public defender and vocal opponent of the

death penalty. Although her dear sister, her unborn child and husband were brutally murdered, Jeanne is an advocate for the abolishment of the death penalty. Capital punishment closes nothing, Jeanne says. She says "an eye for an eye" mentality is an insult. Jeanne says, "I forgive Nancy's killer not because he has an excuse; there is none. I forgive not because he asked for it; he has not. I forgive for the One who asked me to." Jeanne has gone a long way up the ladder of forgiveness.

Buchanan says this is a powerful Lenten lesson. But there is grist to forgiveness that is not mentioned. Roger Nelson, a preacher in Oak Forest, IL. was interviewed recently by the Chicago Tribune regarding the murder of his father more than 25 years ago. His killer is presently serving a life sentence. Tribune staff asked Roger if he forgave the killer. Roger essentially said, "Forgiveness is God's business." Forgiveness is a bridge too far. Who could do it? We need to understand the gravitas of forgiveness. It is not cheap or easy. Forgiveness is a terrific idea and a wonderful concept but it doesn't always work well or easily on the ground. I may say, "I forgive you," but then want nothing to do with you. Such forgiveness has no legs. This is why AA is about fellowship. Not forgiveness. AA suggests we pray for those with whom we hold grudges and resentments. Then it suggests we treat the one who hurt us deeply as we would treat any sick friend. That's a stretch – and a lofty ideal. And it is tough to do. It's also forgiveness with some bite to it.

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is a bi-monthly news and views letter from Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain at Rosecrance. Bread for the Journey is written on behalf of people who live with addictions. Together, and by God's grace, we will try to make a difference.

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