

Putting Forgiveness into Practice

Not too long ago I became very annoyed with a relative of mine for something rather mean she said to my wife who did nothing to deserve her hurtful remarks. I let my Irish temper get the best of me and I couldn't find it in my heart to forgive her. Fr. Mark Link, almost 25 years ago offered this homily about forgiveness. It helped me. In time I forgave her. Maybe his wisdom will be useful to you sometime when forgiveness is called for in your life.

Doris Donnelly has written a beautiful book called *Putting Forgiveness into Practice*. It contains this moving story. One day a seven-year-old boy was riding in the back seat of the family car. He was sitting between his two brothers. Their mother was driving. On this day their mother was feeling especially distraught over having been recently abandoned by their father. Suddenly, in a fit of anger, she spun around and struck the seven-year-old a blow across the face. Then she yelled at him: "And you! I never wanted you. The only reason I had you was to keep your father. But then he left anyway. I hate you."

That scene branded itself on the boy's memory. Over the years his mother reinforced her feelings toward him by constantly finding fault with him. Years later that son told Doris Donnelly: "I can't tell you how many times in the last twenty-three years I relived that experience, probably thousands." Then he added: "But recently I put myself in my mother's shoes. Here she was a high school graduate with no money, no job, and a family to support. I realized how lonely and depressed she must have felt. I thought of the anger and the pain that must have been there. And I thought of how much I reminded her of the failure of her young hopes.

"And so one day I decided to visit her and talk to her. I told her that I understood her feelings and that I loved her just the same. "She broke down and we wept in each other's arms for what seemed to be hours. It was the beginning of a new life for me, for her and for us." That story is a beautiful illustration of the healing power of forgiveness. To use the words of Shakespeare, forgiveness is "twice blest." It blesses the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven. Let's see how it does this.

First, forgiveness blesses the one who forgives. Take the young man in the story. He says that when he forgave his mother, it was the beginning of a new life for him. Time after time, we hear other people say the same thing after they have forgiven someone. For example, a young woman who forgave her father, after they had not spoken for seven years, said of the experience: "It was like being released from prison. I was free and happy for the first time in seven years." Author John Lavater says of forgiveness: "Someone who has never forgiven an enemy has missed one of the most beautiful experiences of life." And so the first point about forgiveness is that it blesses the one who forgives.

This brings us to the second point. Forgiveness also blesses the one forgiven. Again, take the young man in the story. His forgiveness of his mother blessed her in an amazing way: It literally healed her. She was transformed from someone who was so bitter that she told her son, "I hate you and never wanted you" to someone who told him, "I love you and want you with all my heart."

Again, time after time, we hear of people who have been transformed when someone has forgiven them. Take a widely publicized case of a woman who forgave the man who murdered her daughter. Prison officials said her act of forgiveness transformed him into a model prisoner. And so the second point about forgiveness is that it also blesses the one who is forgiven.

You are Loved Deacon Dan