

EDITORIAL: Unmistakable mark of character

January 29, 2010

OK, let's play 20 Questions. And since we don't have space here for the first 18 questions, we'll move to the end of the game. The topic is "Spiritual Practices," and I've been thinking of one particular discipline commanded by Scripture. Your 19th question is this: "Is it the most difficult spiritual practice?" I respond affirmatively. Then you think for a minute and ask: "Is it forgiveness?"

If we were Catholics, and this were Tuesday night, I'd shout, "Bingo!" You got it right. At least that's my experience and observation. Sure, the systematic practice of numerous spiritual disciplines—like prayer, Bible study, generosity, mercy, hospitality, service and pure worship—are't easy. But forgiveness is downright difficult. Several reasons:

Editor Marv Knox

1. Human nature. *The "get even" gene seems to be a dominant feature of our DNA. Our brains think harboring grudges and exacting retribution will feel good.*

2. Social conditioning. *Actually, this is a corollary to #1. Because we tend to think getting even brings pleasure, we make vigilantes into folk heroes and make shouters who always get the last word into media stars and/or re-elected politicians.*

3. Nontranscendence. *I probably made that word up, but it means the American church isn't that much different from the predominant culture. So, if society doesn't forgive, neither do we. (Obviously, this is a corollary to #2.)*

4. Opportunity. *We live in an incivil culture. Folks just keep offending us. And if forgiving once is hard, forgiving the umpteenth time is infinitely more difficult.*

Still, Jesus doesn't give his followers a pass on forgiveness.

In the Model Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray, "... forgive us our sins as we also have forgiven those who sin against us." The Greek verbs used to report Jesus' prayer indicate we both have completed the act of forgiving (Matthew) and are continually, perpetually forgiving (Luke). Some interpreters insist this part of our prayer should ask God to "forgive us to the degree that we forgive others."

Jesus took this part of the prayer so seriously, he offered a hopeful/chilling commentary: "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

This admonition came from the Savior who, while suffering on the Cross, asked that same Father to forgive our sins.

So, if Christians model our lives after Jesus, then this truth should be beyond debate: Forgiveness is the indelible mark of Christian character.

As the [cover-story package in this issue](#) of the *Standard* notes, forgiveness is not the same as blind denial of wrong-doing or timid acquiescence to bullying, intimidation or evil. Forgiveness does not accommodate transgressions, nor does it ignore consequences of wrongdoing. Forgiveness does not move the vulnerable and innocent back into harm's way. And it is not weak sentiment.

Forgiveness opens oneself and others to possibilities not bound by fights, failures and foibles of the past. Christian forgiveness counter-intuitively

extends divine love to the unloving and, humanly speaking, unlovable.

The power of forgiveness is infinite.

My wife and I listened to a sermon by Cyprian Nkiriwumwami, an African minister. He told about a Christian woman whose 15-year-old son was slaughtered in the genocide that ripped Rwanda in the 1990s. Later, that mother forgave, took into her home and raised the 15-year-old boy who killed her son. Such forgiveness is spawning reconciliation once thought impossible.

What would happen in Texas if we practiced forgiveness? What if factions in our divided churches forgave each other? What if people who love Baylor forgave each other? What if Baptists in competing conventions forgave each other?

Jesus forgave us and commanded us to forgive.