

The Forgiveness of Armando Galarraga
Matthew 18:21-22 (Jesus recommends forgiving 77 times!)
Luke 6:37-38 (Forgive and you will be forgiven)

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It's World Series time of year, so I thought it an appropriate time to reflect upon a huge event that took place in baseball this past June. To explain or to refresh anyone's memory, I've enlisted the help of three baseball players to demonstrate what happened on June 2nd. (Jayce Shuler, Nathan and Bob Gardner)

This is the pitcher, Armando Galarraga, 28 years old, a native of Venezuela. Here is the batter (Jason Donald). This is the first-base umpire, Jim Joyce. It is the 9th inning, with 2 outs. And, up until this batter there have been no hits, no walks, and no errors. That is, Galarraga is one out away from having what in baseball is called a "perfect" game.

DEMONSTRATION: **Galarraga** pitches . . . The **batter** hits the ball to the hole between first and second. The first baseman (Cabrera) fields the ball and throws it to **Galarraga**, who has run to cover first. The **umpire** emphatically calls the runner safe.

This call means that Galarraga does not have a perfect game; however, the next batter, the 28th of the game (9 innings times 3 plus 1) grounds out and the game is over.

Needless to say, emotions were running high, as the video clearly showed that the umpire had made a mistake. Clearly, the batter was out and Galarraga **had** pitched a perfect game. In case you're not a baseball fan, perfect games are exceptionally rare, fewer than twenty in all of baseball history!

The umpire was chagrined, realized his mistake and asked to speak to Galarraga, to apologize. The umpire, in fact cried. The umpire said, "I would've been the first person in my face, and he never said a word to me."

What did the pitcher, Galarraga do? (You can listen to his voice on YouTube, if you want, by the way.) After the wrong call, Galarraga quietly went back to work as the crowd started to boo. Galarraga told reporters, "You don't see an umpire after the game come out and say, 'Hey, let me tell you I'm sorry.' 'He felt really bad. . .'"

It seemed that Galarraga almost immediately forgave the umpire for his wrong call. Though Galarraga isn't in the baseball history books with a perfect game, he entered the loving hearts of many as a wonderful role model of human dignity.

Many people, when they have shared some relational dilemma with me, have started their story by saying, "I know I should forgive, but..."

Christians have heard the message very clearly: Forgive. Forgive seventy times seven. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Forgive our trespassers, our debtors.

We often feel guilty when we have not forgiven. We get down on ourselves. First, we are angry, resentful, or bitter at a person or an institution or even God, and then on top of that we heap on self-criticism because we haven't forgiven.

We get ourselves into a bind that is just like having our fingers in a Chinese finger puzzle. We try so hard to forgive because we know we should, but the harder we try, the more stuck we are in condemning ourselves for not being able to forgive.

When forgiveness happens it is such a relief; it really **is** healthy for us not to carry inside ourselves the resentment, bitterness, and anger of past events. Researchers—even secular researchers—name healthy effects of forgiveness. Jesus was 100% correct in saying we need to forgive. *But he did not say it had to be done instantly.*

I'm going to announce something this morning that goes counter to many Christians' common sense (but I'm not a lone ranger in saying this):

Don't **try** to forgive.

Don't feel that you **have to**.

Don't *should* yourself into forgiveness, or into hurrying forgiveness.

AND don't tell a friend or relative that they **HAVE** to forgive. They already know it.

That just makes things worse.

We don't look at our knee when it's scraped and tell it that it **HAS** to heal. We don't sit around and tell our friends that they **MUST** heal their bruised knees. Why? Because we trust that knees will heal. We are generally reasonably patient, knowing the healing process takes time. Yes, we might inspect the healing process at times, we might look at the knee—"Gee, bright new skin here..."

Forgiveness will take place in due time if we intend in that direction.

INTENDING in the direction of forgiveness is healthier than HAVING to forgive. Actually, intending toward forgiveness may get us there even faster than forcing forgiveness.

There are certain things we can do while we're intending in the direction of forgiveness.

For instance, we can think about what God may be doing. When something wrong or hurtful is done, it cannot be erased, cannot be undone. That's true. God can't take away an insult, can't make a bomb not follow gravity after it's released. But I think of it this way: God's forgiveness instantly makes many possibilities available in the very next second. The insult has been vocalized, but NOW there can be explanations, empathy, expanding understandings of each other, and more thorough self understanding. The bomb falls, but immediately people could decide: "That's enough—let's compromise and end our fighting." I don't think that *God* wastes any time forgiving; that is, God immediately gives all God's love and grace and wisdom to everyone and provides *possibilities* for hope for all.

So, while we're *intending* in the direction of forgiveness we can try very hard to SEE more than we have ever seen before--about others and about ourselves. In virtually all instances where forgiveness is intended, more truth needs to be named and heard by all involved. More truth.

Seeing *more* usually occurs by means of tiny shifts. At first the other is a "bleep"... Then gradually, upon seeing, hearing, and reflecting, the other becomes a **human being**, maybe an *unkind* one, but at least human. Seeing and hearing and reflecting *more* evokes some compassion. We find ourselves thinking, "I didn't know *that* about you." "I hadn't realized *that*." Lo and behold, the other becomes a **hurting other** who is worthy of compassion. Another tiny shift has happened; we're able to see each other eye to eye. We've expanded our view of the other and of ourselves as we *intend* toward forgiveness.

In some instances the other person is not available, but healing still includes being radically honest about what occurred. Ignoring or denying painful truth doesn't get us there, but seeing clearly intends toward forgiveness.

In asking what is *now* possible, we are being co-creators with God, as God keeps introducing possibilities in the present.

Intending toward forgiveness, though, is not just an internal process. Action helps us move toward the intended forgiveness; it's pretty hard to sit on a sofa and forgive.

Sometimes unified action with others who are also hurt helps a lot. The mining "disaster" in Chile is a good example of this. When it happened, the miners and their families were understandably angry and fearful. I cannot imagine that their first reaction was anything like "forgiveness." We all know what happened. A miracle, really. I'm not talking about the fascinating container that was used to return the men through the mountain almost three months later. I'm talking about the miracle between the miners themselves.

The miners rose to the occasion in a surprising way. So, too, did the Chilean authorities. When the disaster first happened, surely many people were light-years away from even considering forgiveness. However, as the miners and people from all over Chile and even the world worked so devotedly and tirelessly together, everyone involved seemed to be open to what we might call God's tiny little shifts. Little by little they saw clearly their current situation and allowed themselves to be co-creators with God who was offering so many possibilities to them all.¹ Strangely, by the end of the ordeal, with all 33 miners safely rescued, the event was more celebratory than condemning. We think of the whole event as a triumph for Chile, a marvel of cooperation and even compassion. Those miners were an awesome community--role models of people open to communal good.

I see similarities between the miners and Armando Galarraga. When empathy and compassion happen so quickly that cooperation and answers dominate, then the whole process of forgiveness seems short-circuited. Reconciliation seems to dominate the event rather than the anger and upset. (Though, I'm rather sure that both with the umpire mistake and the mining disaster there is likely to be some recurring anger, with some need of *intending toward* forgiveness in the future.)

Resolution does not always happen for us promptly every time something wrong happens.

Until working on this sermon, I assumed that when Jesus suggested that we forgive 77 times, he meant that we forgive 77 different incidents. Now, I'm not so sure. **In some circumstances in which we or another is really hurt, 77 may be the number of times we *intend* in the direction of forgiveness before forgiveness happens.**

John Patton, who wrote *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* influenced me immensely on this topic. (I loaned his book to someone and cannot find it; though I have forgiven them for not returning it.) Patton suggests that at some point we realize, "I guess I did forgive, it's gone." **We *discover* our forgiveness rather than make it happen.**²

Remember when you had a cough the last time you were sick? Perhaps you slept with several pillows, maybe you took cough medicine. Then one day you stopped coughing. Do you think you realized you stopped coughing on the *first* night you stopped? I doubt it. I tend to realize I've stopped coughing several days later. One night I realize, "Gee, I haven't been coughing." It's like that with forgiveness. "Gee, I guess I've forgiven." I hadn't realized that till now.

Preparing this sermon I stopped to think of a few situations which made me very angry. It was a good thing to do, for I realized that even some huge situations I now have

a hard time recollecting with details. I realized that I am genuinely not carrying those instances around in my “Unforgiven file.”

What about that skinned knee? When did it finish healing? We barely notice. But it did heal. That’s how it is with forgiveness if we let the tiny shifts take place that God is offering to us.

Intending toward forgiveness includes seeing more widely, facing current reality with its realistic options and taking action, maybe unified with others.

Forgiving ourselves involves accepting God’s acceptance. We do not even need to ask for forgiveness from God. I know that for centuries it was assumed that we had to confess in order to be forgiven. But what kind of God is that? God forgives instantly, by offering new options immediately. I don’t think God wastes much time on the past, bemoaning it. Our believing that God is trying to help us to see new alternatives may take a while. *Accepting* God’s acceptance of us may take time, but the time needed is for us, not for God.

At some point, as we *intend* toward forgiveness, we amaze ourselves. We have forgiven. The energy around the hatred or bitterness is *just not there anymore*. We are free.³ **“Only a free person can live with an uneven score”**⁴ or a mistaken call on the last out of a “perfect” game.

May we all be free people, **or at least intend in that direction.**

¹ 77-92.

² Patton, John. *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 199__.

³ Whenever it occurs, forgiveness should offer us the joy of freedom; it should not be an entrapment.³

⁴ Smedes, Lewis B., Thompson, op. cit., 88.