

Forgiveness and mercy are something we call to mind time and time again as Christians. We ask for forgiveness and an ability to forgive when we say the Lord's Prayer; we acknowledge our sins in the penitential rite and sacrament of reconciliation; and we hear Jesus speak of God's mercy but also in how we must strive to be a person of mercy as well and forgive one another. Today, on Good Friday, all of this is seen most vividly when we look to the Cross and reflect on how far God is willing to go for us, forgiving those who weren't even asking for mercy, freely laying down his life.

Forgiveness though can be painful. It can be painful to confront our past or to bring sins out into the open. And it can be painful also to think about the past and how people have hurt us. But when we open our eyes and hearts to the power of mercy, its power is liberating.

In Holland during the Second World War, there were many heroes who helped to rescue people, and among them was Corrie ten Boom, who was the youngest child of Casper ten Boom, a jeweler and watchmaker. She became one as well, and started a youth club to provide religious education; she was Christian, part of the Dutch Reformed Church. But she strived to help people in need no matter what their religion.

In May of 1942, two years into the Nazi occupation of Holland, a well dressed woman came to her family's home with a suitcase and told her family that she was a Jew, and her husband had been arrested and her son went into hiding and Occupation authorities recently visited her so she was fearful of going back home. Corrie's father said simply "in this household, God's people are always welcome." After this her family was involved in the Dutch underground hiding refugees. It became known as the Hiding Place; Corrie went on to write a book about it. The Resistance helped the family build a secret room to hide Jews and put in an alert buzzer to warn refugees to get into the room as quickly as possible when there was a surprise arrival of Nazi troops.

In February of 1944, a Dutch informant told the Nazi's about what they were doing. The entire family was arrested. Corrie was put in prison, and was sent with her sister, Betsie, to a political concentration camp and eventually to a women's labor camp in Germany. Her sister Betsie died there at the age of 59, due largely to how she was treated, and before she died, she told Corrie that "There is no pit so deep that He (God) is not

deeper still. Corrie was released 15 days later, but later learned it was a clerical error and women her age were sent to the gas chambers.

She returned to help the mentally ill during the last winter of the war when food was in short supply. She went on to continue to help people in need after the war including refugees and former concentration camp prisoners. But one of the most amazing experiences of her life came when she was talking about the very thing Good Friday is all about; God's response to sin, which is mercy. She writes of a powerful experience where she ran into the man who played a role in the death of her sister. In her own words:

“It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear.

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown.

"When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever."

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: “A fine message, fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!”

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk,” he was saying. “I was a guard in there.” No, he did not remember me.

“But since that time,” he went on, “I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein”—again the hand came out—“will you forgive me?”

And I stood there—I whose sins had every day to be forgiven—and could not. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality.

Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

“Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.

And having thus learned to forgive in this hardest of situations, I never again had difficulty in forgiving: I wish I could say it! I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn't.

If there's one thing I've learned at 80 years of age, it's that I can't store up good feelings and behavior—but only draw them fresh from God each day.

Maybe I'm glad it's that way. For every time I go to Him, He teaches me something else. I recall the time, some years ago, when some Christian friends whom I loved and trusted did something which hurt me.

You would have thought that, having forgiven the Nazi guard, this would have been child's play. It wasn't. For weeks I seethed inside. But at last I asked God again to work His miracle in me. And again it happened: first the cold-blooded decision, then the flood of joy and peace.

I had forgiven my friends; I was restored to my Father.

Then, why was I suddenly awake in the middle of the night, hashing over the whole affair again? My friends! I thought. People I loved! If it had been strangers, I wouldn't have minded so.

I sat up and switched on the light. "Father, I thought it was all forgiven! Please help me do it!"

But the next night I woke up again. They'd talked so sweetly too! Never a hint of what they were planning. "Father!" I cried in alarm. "Help me!"

His help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks.

"Up in that church tower," he said, nodding out the window, "is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops.

“I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive someone, we take our hand off the rope. But if we’ve been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn’t be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They’re just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.”

And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversation. But the force—which was my willingness in the matter—had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at last stopped altogether.

And so I discovered another secret of forgiveness: that we can trust God not only above our emotions, but also above our thoughts.

And still He had more to teach me, even in this single episode. Because many years later, in 1970, an American with whom I had shared the ding-dong principle came to visit me in Holland and met the people involved. “Aren’t those the friends who let you down?” he asked as they left my apartment.

“Yes,” I said a little smugly. “You can see it’s all forgiven.”

“By you, yes,” he said. “But what about them? Have they accepted your forgiveness?”

“They say there’s nothing to forgive! They deny it ever happened. But I can prove it!” I went eagerly to my desk. “I have it in black and white! I saved all their letters and I can show you where—”

“Corrie!” My friend slipped his arm through mine and gently closed the drawer. “Aren’t you the one whose sins are at the bottom of the sea? And are the sins of your friends etched in black and white?”

For an anguishing moment I could not find my voice. “Lord Jesus,” I whispered at last, “who takes all my sins away, forgive me for preserving all these years the evidence against others! Give me grace to burn all the blacks and whites as a sweet-smelling sacrifice to Your glory.”

I did not go to sleep that night until I had gone through my desk and pulled out those letters—curling now with age—and fed them all into my little coal-burning grate. As the flames leaped and glowed, so did my heart.

“Forgive us our trespasses,” Jesus taught us to pray, “as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In the ashes of those letters I was seeing yet another facet of His mercy. What more He would teach me about forgiveness in the days ahead I didn’t know, but tonight’s was good news enough.

When we bring our sins to Jesus, He not only forgives them, He makes them as if they had never been.

Such is the power of mercy, which is what we celebrate on this Good Friday. So today, let us open up our eyes to that mercy. Let us cast our sins to the bottom of the sea, thinking about how Jesus does that, and think for a moment how we can forgive as Jesus does.

It starts by acknowledging the reality of sin. Notice how barren the church is today? The Cross is front and center. The reminder of what God does in

the face of evil. There were many who tried to deny the reality of the Holocaust. Or what people were going through because they themselves were not Jewish. Denial has always been a problem with us as humans; people may say “I’m basically a good person” or “I’m really not all that bad” and so they sweep sin under the rug. Out of sight, out of mind. The Cross shows us the ugliness of sin in that God Himself came to be with us, and we as humans killed Him. We as humans chose darkness. As another preacher put it, Christ is crucified in the vulnerable of every age and place, including our own. We have to get sin out in the open by acknowledging it.

But then, we realize as that Nazi guard did, that mercy has no asterisk next to it. He confronted his past, but he wanted to change. The Cross is God’s response to love. That is His response to sin. God’s response to my sin, the sin of that guard, to your sin, is to make it personal and love us not in a way that leaves us in our sin but that calls us away from it. We may fall again into sin, but our sins will not have the last word ever because Jesus will always love us even in our worst moments. His love will always call us back. The Cross assures us our sins have a remedy, so think about that as you venerate the Cross tonight. God loves you more than you can ever imagine.

Lastly though, ask yourself what is it you are holding back. What is it that you need to let go of like Corrie did both with that guard and with her friends who had wronged her? People wrong us all the time. And when we hold on to these pains, it's important to acknowledge if there is an injustice we have experienced. Sometimes you can't have a relationship with a person anymore because something so serious has transpired. But there can always be forgiveness. When we look to the Cross, we need to ask for the power to let go. Jesus forgave even when no one was asking for it at the time. And come Easter, there are no grudges. Simply the message "peace." If you are struggling forgiving someone who has wronged you, or someone who is hard to love, ask for the strength to take the first step. Pray for that person. Do what Corrie did and ask for Jesus' help in letting go. And know that like for Corrie, there will be moments in the future where you have to let go all over again. But what you will find is that it is truly liberating. No longer does the person or past have power over you. And what you might find is that a person who at one point was filled with such evil or ignorance of their actions may be changed because you opted not to return it with anger or animosity, but did what Corrie did and did what our Lord did all those years ago, and instead returned it with love.

There is no getting around evil in the world both in our lives and in the world as a whole. God does not just want us to be “pretty good” people. God wants us to love Him perfectly with nothing in the way and to love others as he loves us. To do that though is disquieting. It means taking an honest look at our lives and the things that we do or don’t do that we should, and name them and ask Jesus to help us overcome them. And it means looking at the world and not giving up, but doing something about evil as Jesus did, and as Corrie did throughout her life. Evil is powerful indeed. But far more powerful is the power of mercy. So let us open our hearts to receive it and bring it into the world that needs to see the power of love and mercy more than ever.