

When I was in middle school, there was this kid that really got my goat. Oh man, I hated that kid. He was such a jerk, and things between us got nastier and nastier. One day, I was sitting in the lunchroom, and he walked by carrying his lunch tray and bumped into me from behind. I couldn't contain myself any longer, and I jumped up madder than a wet hen and punched him right in the back of the head. I'm not proud of that, not at all, but it's what I did. Oh, I was mad. I wanted him to fight back. I wanted to punch him again. I wanted him to punch me. I wanted a real brawl, win or lose, but I wanted it to be settled and punching was about the full extent of interpersonal problem solving I knew. You know what he did? He turned around, looked at me as calm as could be, shook his head, and walked away. He didn't fight back. He didn't punch me. He didn't let me win or lose. He settled it with nothing more than a look of sad disappointment. Later, I found out all that nastiness was in my imagination. He didn't know I was boiling, and he bumped into me by accident. And still his response was the most devastating thing he could've done. I sat down, ashamed, and whatever nastiness had been pointed outward pointed right back inside. I never did anything like that again.

Jesus tells us to forgive. A lot. Seventy-seven times today. Sometimes it's someone with power forgiving those beneath them like in today's parable. The king forgave a slave's debt. Sometimes it's the other way around. A regular person forgives the higher ups. Sometimes it's on the same sociological plane with a regular person forgiving another regular person, but even then, if one of them does something that warrants asking for forgiveness, there's been some breach of the other's agency. We tend to think of forgiveness as something to seek out when we've wronged someone else. But think about that lunchroom from the other kid's perspective. He was minding his own business when he accidentally bumped into somebody and out of nowhere, bam! He got clocked in the back of the head. When he turned around, he chose an option I didn't expect, and that ended it. But imagine if I'd asked him for forgiveness. Instead of clinching my jaw for the retaliation that was sure to come, even if I'd been sincere, that would've doubled the offense. I hurt him and then would've been telling him to drop it. Accept the pain and don't retaliate. And if you do retaliate, you're in the wrong for not accepting an apology. See the problem?

Let's look at this on a much bigger scale. There's a controversial Holocaust survivor named Eva Mozes Kor who believed no one's beyond forgiveness. She publicly forgave even the Nazis who tortured her. She was very clear that she would not forget, but she forgave nonetheless because Kor realized, when she forgave she took something back that had been taken from her. She took back her past, and by taking back her past, she took back the rest of her life. Defending that forgiveness, she said, "Every victim has a right to be free from what was imposed on them." But notice, she didn't let them off the hook. She forgave them because she understood that not forgiving kept her under their power. Choosing to forgive was the same as choosing to be released from the horror that bound her to them. To be clear, Kor is not a popular figure, but she's not alone, either. Edith Eger said forgiveness is self-liberation, not a pardon of others' misdeeds or an erasure of the past. "To forgive," Eger said, "is to grieve -- for what occurred, for what did not -- and to release the longing for a different past."

Forgiveness is not the same thing as a pardon or reconciliation. It's certainly not forgetting. Forgiveness releases the control the wounds dealt by your oppressor hold over you; it heals your soul, looses the last remnant of power another wields. It reclaims your right to assert your autonomy. Forgiveness is a powerful tool, but its power isn't limited to one's soul. And so, one use of forgiveness that's troubling me now appears in the hands of oppressors. Oppressors often demand forgiveness as a means of control. They condemn those who refuse to forgive, deify those who forgive against all reason, call those who won't forgive immoral and valorize those who stoop to forgive the ones they've harmed.

Look at the backlash against Black Lives Matter or the #MeToo Movement or the plight of the Palestinians. Their various oppressors clutch their pearls when all that oppression comes back to them with justified anger, and that anger's painted as the failing of the oppressed group who just couldn't find it within themselves to forgive. And oppressors take that beyond a failing of choice and make it into a failing of character. It's never just individual character, either; it's the oppressor's depiction that says their failure to forgive is a failure of enlightenment, a failure chalked up to some predisposition that further negates their complaints *as a group*. And further, oppressors know this power so deeply that it allows them to commit the worst atrocities because if everything must be forgiven, then nothing's unforgivable. And if nothing's unforgivable, you've got every tool at your disposal. And if you use all those tools--and why wouldn't you?--you break and break and break a person so deeply that their ability to forgive breaks, too. And if you break their ability to forgive, then you can paint them as so detestable that they deserve such treatment. And further still, that part of us that can forgive is deep, deep within our souls. It's not unreachable, but it is one of the last remaining battlements of autonomy in an otherwise broken and battered soul.

Perhaps one of the most haunting results of unfathomable physical, psychological, and spiritual violence strips away the willingness or even the ability for an oppressed person to forgive as it keeps them locked in that bitter place where their oppressor left them. And if you know your target's been abandoned to that place of bitterness, you know they're unlikely to forgive the wrongs done -- an unforgivable lapse in the oppressor's system. So, not being the forgiving type becomes a justification for further violence. And maybe the suspicion that they won't forgive becomes a justification for preemptive violence, too. When the oppressor valorizes forgiveness, be careful. Conversely, when the oppressed argues for forgiveness for their own soul's health, it carries a completely different, even hopeful set of meanings. Forgiving seventy-seven times seems unfathomable, especially if we're envisioning the oppressor's conception of forgiveness. But if we see it as a way to reclaim something of ourselves or to preserve our own autonomy, it's a different matter altogether.

There is a wrinkle, though, that benefits all involved even if we'd rather deny the oppressor such a benefit. Oppression is a sin. Forgiving someone who has oppressed you removes sin's hold over you, but it also has the potential to remove the hold sin has over the oppressor. For those with a conscience, oppressing another human being harms their souls, haunts them, enshrines a bitterness in them, too. Being forgiven doesn't fix that on its own, but it's a signpost to follow should they choose to. And sometimes, sometimes we don't even want them to get that much. But it could lead to a release from the hold sin maintains on them. Less sin in the world's good for everybody, which is great and also just plain stinks. I don't want to give them that as much as I don't want to release them from their justly earned consequences. I want them to suffer. And here I am again, not really all that changed from that middle school kid throwing a punch in the lunchroom. I want them to suffer, I want them to get angry, I want them to feel the need for revenge. But that forgiveness of the oppressor by the oppressed is like that kid that shook his head and walked away. He didn't let it define him. He didn't say a word to me. It hurt worse than if he'd actually punched me in the gut. It was the worst thing he could've done to me, and it was the best.

Within the Church, or any institution, it's especially important to consider how we deploy forgiveness. Forgiveness should never be a means of control. It should return agency from where it was taken, equalize power, and reclaim what remains as one's own. Don't distort God's commands on order to control. Use them to heal. Use them to remove wrongs and the hold wrongs maintain. Use them as Eva Mozes Kor would, to free every victim from what was imposed on them. Seventy-seven times.