

Why Forgive?

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Why Forgive?
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The Book of Philemon

Why forgive?
Because our common salvation depends on it. That's why.

...Let us pray...

There is a Korean American theologian by the name of Andrew Sung Park who argues that the Western world focuses forgiveness almost solely on sinners, perpetrators and offenders. I think he's right. If we look at the history of forgiveness in theology and religious practice in the western tradition of Christianity, particularly in Catholicism and Protestantism, it's all about sinfulness and repentance. Guilt, confession and God's absolution. Notice there's absolutely no focus on the victims of sin. No energy or time spent on those who carry in body and soul, the pain of sin itself. Rev. Dr. Andrew Sung Park boldly says "the idea that sinners can achieve salvation by confessing their own sin regardless of the welfare of their victims is narcissistic illusion." Narcissism, self-centered individualism is, according to Park and according to this preacher, the sin lurking in most Western notions of forgiveness.

Park wants us to consider how the history of the West, a history full of land-grabbing, ethnic cleansing, slavery and patriarchal control of women's bodies might be influencing this understanding of forgiveness. He is suggesting that there's something about our understanding of forgiveness that is unique to our Western experience. He is also suggesting that it is all too convenient for an understanding of forgiveness to be focused on and beneficial to

perpetrators if we are, in deed, the perpetrators. And I would say such a convenience has nothing to do with forgiveness as the Gospel intends, but absolution of individual guilt which is something entirely different.

Just as Park says there's something unique to Western experience that colors (or perhaps whitens—yeah I said it) our notion of forgiveness, he claims that his experience as a young person in Korea influences his understanding of forgiveness. Park was forced as a kid to move from Northern to Southern Korea when war shattered the land of his birth. The Korean war was part of the Cold War and it was also what's known as a "proxy war," meaning allies from the outside took sides, resourced and sometimes carried out the fighting in Korea, which eventually caused civil war and a split between North and South. Andrew Sung Park has spent a lifetime creating Christian theologies of sin and salvation from his experience of occupation, violence, civil war and childhood dislocation. Not surprisingly he conceives of forgiveness differently than we do here in the West.

(First slide)

He brings the Korean term "han" into the conversation. Han is a word that has no English equivalent, but he defines it for us as "the abyss of suffering." It is the collective anguish of a people. Feelings of unsolved resentment, longstanding lament for injustices endured over time. This term is specifically located in Minjung theology: theology done by and for the people of Korea. Park introduces this concept to critique the individualism of western concepts of forgiveness. For Park, forgiveness must be relational and must include the healing of han. For him, salvation or total forgiveness is when sinning stops and the injured are healed. That includes both perpetrators and victims. In his model we not only confess the pain, but find ourselves responsible to the relationship wherein the pain occurred. And that relationship must be made right on both sides.

So in answer to our question for today—why forgive?—Andrew Sung Park would say because our common salvation depends on it, sinners and victims alike. And I agree with him.

Today's biblical text is a letter written by the imprisoned Apostle Paul. It is an appeal to wealthy land-owning, head-of-the-church in Collosae, Philemon. The letter is a request by the Apostle Paul to Philemon, a request that Philemon take back his former slave Onesimus who has apparently run away and come under Paul's Christian tutelage during his escape from slavery. Paul is urging his colleague Philemon to forgive Onesimus for running away and to receive him back as a "brother in Christ."

Without deep dissection and deconstruction, this text is seriously problematic. Ostensibly one could read this and take away that Onesimus is the one who needs forgiving, that the slave is the sinner because he chose to run-away. I don't give two cents about the context of the Bible: a run-away slave is never the problem. Slavery is the problem. This story also puts Philemon, the slave-owner in the position of pardoning—hardly consistent with Jesus' critique of the wealthy and powerful. Finally, it puts Paul in the position of outside negotiator, one who has the power to restore Onesimus' life and the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon. Outside negotiation is triangulation; it isn't the reconciliation of a relationship. So here's what's MOST problematic if we don't go further than a surface glance of this text.

Onesimus never has voice in this story. Not once. We don't know what kind of enslavement he was living under in the house of Philemon. We don't know why he chose to run away. We don't know why he converted to Christianity. We don't even know if he *wants* to go back to Philemon's house. Everything about this letter between Paul and Philemon renders Onesimus a commodity to be negotiated, not a human being with agency and a will of his own. And if

that's not bad enough, here's the real kicker: the only thing we absolutely know about Onesimus is his name and it literally means "useful." Paul says in verse 11: "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to both to you and to me."

I've been wrestling with this story all week because I've inherited a book, religion, and cultural history that has rendered the Onesimus's of the world simultaneously useful and voiceless for thousands of years. Onesimus: women in the church who can teach and take care of children, serve meals and pour coffee, but still can't speak from the pulpit in many denominations. Onesimus: migrant workers who can do jobs most white Americans wouldn't touch but God forbid they'd ask for health-care or decent education for their children. Onesimus: gay folks who can sing in our choirs and cut our hair but please don't talk about your relationship in public, and don't even think about getting married. Onesimus: young people who are good enough to send into wars that none of us see or understand but when they come home racked with PTSD we'd prefer them stay behind closed clinical doors. Onesimus: usable but voiceless. When I graduated from seminary I swore backwards and forwards as a clergy person that I was going to do everything in my power *not* to perpetuate the pattern of using but silencing Onesimus. So I've been wrestling all week.

Instead of chucking the story all together, I tried to think, in the spirit of Andrew Sung Park, what would cease the sin and heal the han in this story. Perhaps the first step, as my friend Laura suggested, is to listen for Onesimus instead of hearing about him. He is no longer with us in the flesh, but what about the Onesimus' of the world today? What if we made them a primary focus in our sacred conversation on forgiveness? What if we are those used but unseen and unheard? What would forgiveness look like for us?

I assume it would begin with a deep listening to the pain of

being simultaneously used and silenced. And I assume healing would come when those injured could articulate, in the very relationships of brokenness that have hurt them, what they need to be made whole. And in a perfect world, a world where our common salvation was the priority of all, those relationships would become whole again.

What would Onesimus express about the pain of being enslaved? Of being passed back and forth by the powerful? What would he ask for in order to be healed? Freedom, respect, equality, a return to his ancestral family, an entirely different society? What would Philemon and Paul need to do in response to his request? How might Onesimus' pleas for forgiveness change the way Philemon and Paul lived in a day to day way if they actually took his pleas seriously?

And in your relationships? What needs to be expressed and deeply heard? What needs to be articulated? What would you ask for in the pursuit of wholeness? If you're the one who has hurt somebody, are you willing to take a plea for wholeness seriously? Seriously enough to change your behavior that the relationship might be restored?

Why forgive? Because our common salvation depends on it. And not just in one-one-one relationships. But in families and communities. Between civil war states and nations and religions. Our common salvation depends on it. That's why.

