

The Art of Forgiveness

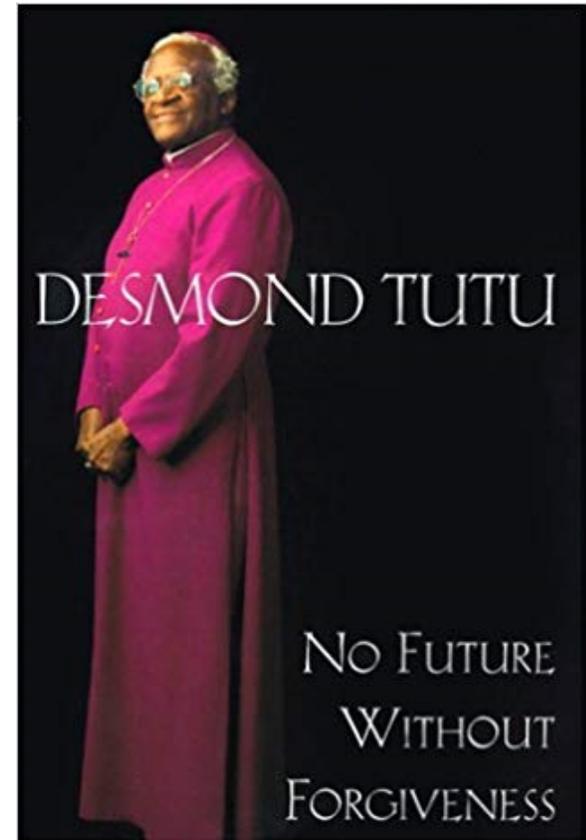
STEVEN L. THOMASON
SAINT MARK'S CATHEDRAL
SEPTEMBER 2019
WEEK 1: SEPTEMBER 11, 2019

Overview of three-week series

- ▶ WHY FORGIVE?
- ▶ What forgiveness is; what it is not...
- ▶ A model to move away from “Revenge Cycle” into “Forgiveness Experience”
- ▶ How to approach the most difficult and challenging “opportunities” for forgiveness
- ▶ How to practice forgiveness of oneself

- ▶ Two presuppositions for the series (premised on our understanding of who God is)
 1. There is nothing that cannot be forgiven.
 2. There is no one who is inherently undeserving of forgiveness.

A Story from Desmond Tutu



What do the
scriptures say?

How do we
respond?

- ▶ The way back to God, says Jeremiah, is *the way of forgiveness*:
- ▶ Forgiveness is not simply a generous attitude
- ▶ We live in a world of commodity, scorekeeping, where nothing is ever forgotten. It is a world of despair, because we are locked in to old behavior.
- ▶ New possibility can happen in that world only when there is forgiveness, when in an act of inexplicable generosity the vicious cycles of resentment and revenge are broken.

We must be honest...

- ▶ Brueggemann's *The Spirituality of the Psalms*.
- ▶ "The psalms issue a mighty protest and invite us into a more honest facing of the darkness."
- ▶ Forgiveness does not involve clichés or forgetting. It lies in lament: a fierce reckoning with what has happened, and how we feel about it.
- ▶ Brueggemann: without lament, there's no forgiveness.
- ▶ **LAMENT ENSURES WE'RE NOT DELUDING OURSELVES ABOUT THE STATE OF OUR HEARTS**
- ▶ **LAMENT PROTECTS US FROM EXPOSING OURSELVES TO PEOPLE WHO AREN'T SAFE**

Why forgive?

- ▶ We are all broken...and broken, we hurt others
- ▶ Forgiveness is the path to healing (the best self-interest)
- ▶ There is no future of peace without forgiveness
 - ▶ Individually
 - ▶ Communally
 - ▶ Societally
- ▶ Revenge/retaliation rarely satisfies (vengeance is not our work)
- ▶ We forgive for our own sakes primarily...(not dependent on the action of the other)

The Science of Forgiveness

- ▶ Several studies have demonstrated that forgiveness:
 - ▶ Lowers blood pressure
 - ▶ Decreases levels of anxiety, depression and anger
 - ▶ Decreases incidence of somatic symptoms (backaches, headaches, insomnia)
 - ▶ Increases hope, spiritual connection
 - ▶ Correlates with higher emotional intelligence
- ▶ Positive Psychology (Martin Seligman, et al.)—more positive emotions leading to human flourishing
- ▶ Donna Hicks—enhanced sense of dignity (for self and others) when forgiveness is considered a virtue
- ▶ Ubuntu—So. African cultural understanding of humanity and its interconnectedness

Sociological and Theological Considerations



No one is born a criminal



No one is born cruel

Pathology exists—
diagnostic criteria, but
largely rooted in fear
and low self-esteem



All are created in the
image of God—do we
really believe this?



Is it our goodness, or our
depravity that guides
our relationships?

Caveat: This is not about
remaining in abusive
situations

Table Conversations—three prompts

- ▶ Do you think real forgiveness is difficult? If so, why?
- ▶ What are some cultural impediments to forgiveness being more accepted?
- ▶ What societal, institutional, communal and individual changes could potentially shift things to become a more forgiving world?

First,
forgiveness is
not...

- ▶ An invitation to forget.
- ▶ An invitation to minimize the injury.
- ▶ An invitation to pretend the relationship is just fine.

- ▶ Weakness (actually the work of forgiveness is not for the faint of heart)
- ▶ Subversion of justice (people live with the consequences)
- ▶ Easy

- ▶ It is not about denying the truth of what has happened.

Forgiveness is...



An invitation to
acknowledge the
perpetrator's
humanity



An invitation to
claim your shared
humanity



An invitation to find
healing and
peace.



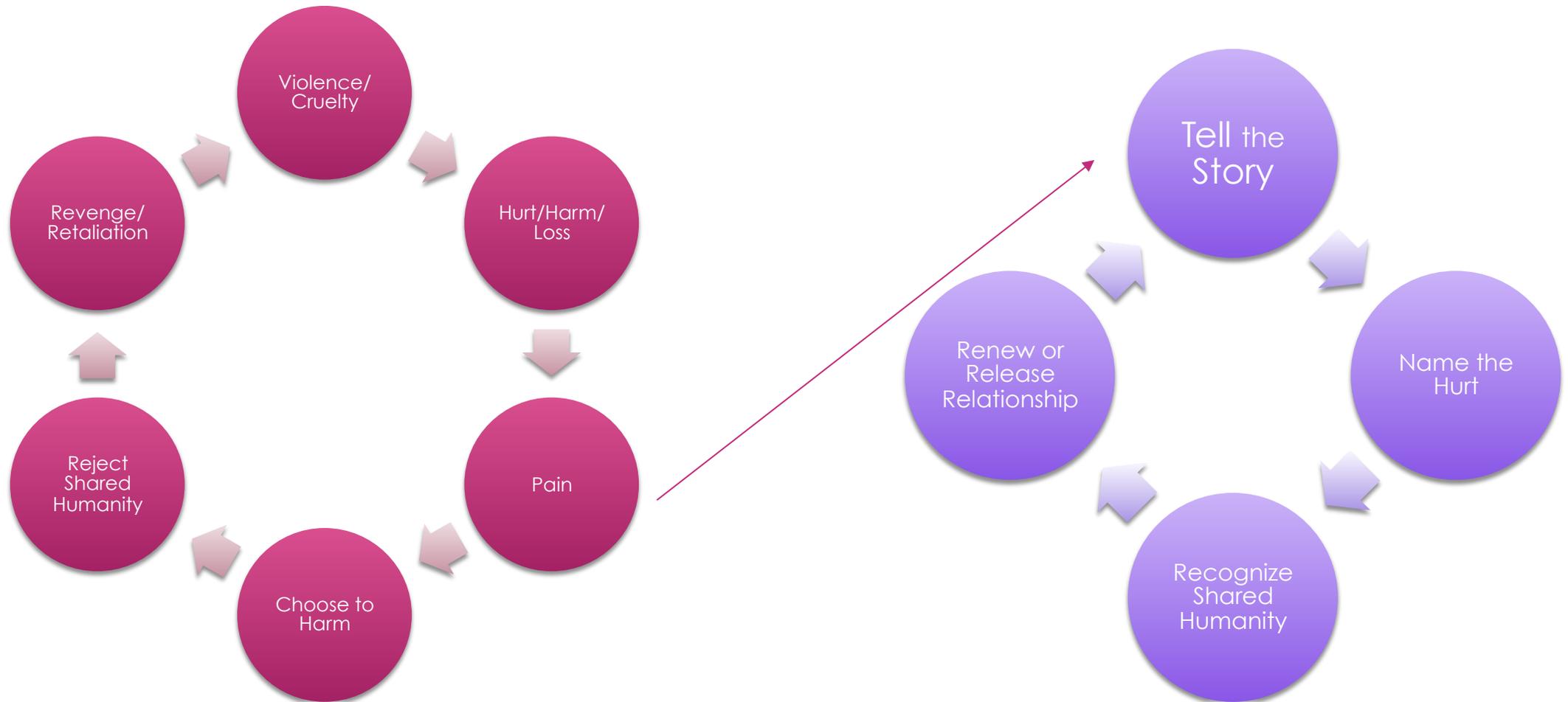
Tutu's dialect—
Xhosa = peace

Ndicel xholo: "I
ask for peace" is
said when
engaging the
work of
forgiveness.



What does it mean
to "let go?"

From Left to Right...(resist habituated reaction)



Not for the faint of heart

- ▶ The work of forgiveness means we do not deny the pain and grief but are willing to hold them.
- ▶ Lament: How long, O lord, how long?!
- ▶ How long does it take to forgive?
 - ▶ Be gentle with yourself
 - ▶ Work it in your heart before striking out with others who have harmed you

Tandem Sharing

- ▶ Share an experience in which you wronged another and needed to be forgiven.
 - ▶ How did you feel? Did you ask for forgiveness?
 - ▶ Was it granted?
 - ▶ Were you both honest in acknowledging the pain and hurt?
 - ▶ How do you remember it now?
 - ▶ How is the relationship different now, in the wake of that experience?

Next Week:
Unpacking the
fourfold path to
forgiveness

Homework assignment

Journal about a time you were betrayed, or were hurt by another, and whether/how forgiveness was given by you.

Journal about those who you need to forgive, and about those whom you would like to ask forgiveness. How would you go about that?

Selected Bibliography

- ▶ Brueggemann, Walter. *The Spirituality of the Psalms*. Fortress, 2001.
- ▶ Hicks, Donna. *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*. Yale Univ. Press, 2013
- ▶ Tutu, Desmond and Mpho Tutu. *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path to Healing Ourselves and the World*. Harper, 2015.
- ▶ Tutu, Desmond. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Image, 2000
- ▶ Volf, Miroslav. *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. Zondervan 2006.