

One New Book for the Preacher

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Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path of Healing Ourselves and Our World* (New York: Harper One), 2014.

Desmond Tutu will surely be remembered for a very long time as a Christian churchman who profoundly influenced for the good one of the most critical periods in the world in recent history. The first black Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, Tutu was a vocal opponent of the South African system of apartheid, one of the most racist and oppressive political arrangements in our time. For his tireless advocacy for human rights, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism, the Pacem in Terra Award, and many other international accolades. In addition, Bishop Tutu served as Chair of the newly democratic South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Anyone who ever met him—and I did, briefly—was compelled by both his obvious integrity as a Christian social activist but also his personal charm, grace, and infectious smile. Tutu modeled for many of us just the right mixture of prophetic impatience with injustice and compassionate, deeply human pastoral love. He has partnered to write this book with his daughter, Mpho Tutu, also an Anglican Priest, and Executive Director of the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation. Together they have created a marvelous resource, a highly readable book full of personal anecdotes and, for the preacher, a lifetime of sermon illustrations. The book also includes a methodology for putting into practice the illusive and difficult virtue of forgiving.

The book opens with the first of many gripping stories, a widow's heart-wrenching and horrific testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Her husband had been "disappeared" by the South African government, tortured, and murdered. She told the commissioners that her husband's body bore forty-three wounds, acid had been poured on his face, and his right hand had been severed. The woman's daughter, eight years old when her father was murdered, described the years of hardship that followed, punctuated by police harassment. The Commission members were stunned by what the young woman, now nineteen, said next. "I would love to know who killed my father. So would my brother. We want to forgive them, but we don't know who to forgive" (page 2).

Other anecdotes throughout the book, many of them personal to the Tutus, dramatize the tragedy and potential for violent revenge when the apartheid system ultimately collapsed. Other anecdotes are of random violence to which all of us are subject. One of the personal accounts is of the brutal murder of Angela, Mpho Tutu's beloved housekeeper and caregiver for her daughter. Tutu describes her journey through grief, rage, and revenge to reconciliation and peace. A breathtaking illustration is of Bishop Malusi Moumlwaua, an anti-apartheid activist who was arrested and tortured extensively by the South African police. He later told Bishop Tutu that his experience renewed his commitment to the anti-apartheid cause, but in the middle of torture, he had come upon an astonishing insight. "These are God's children, and they are

losing their humanity. We have to help them recover it” (page 34). As I read this and other accounts of suffering and injustice, I found myself wanting only to be silently grateful for these profound examples of Christ-like grace. These people exhibited a depth and strength of faithfulness that puts my own tepid faith to shame.

I clearly recall the report of a friend of mine who had visited apartheid era South Africa. He told me about seeing the disciplined, well-equipped, very visible and present South African military, one of the strongest in the world. “There is no way,” he said, “that an absolute catastrophe can be avoided.” He was not alone in that analysis. Historians will ponder for years why it didn’t happen, why black South Africans, when the system fell and the first democratic election was held in 1994, did not exact a terrible revenge on their oppressors.

The reasons are beyond the scope of this book, but surely the witness of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his transparent Christian faith are among them, as is the towering figure of Nelson Mandela. This is not a book about Mandela, but he looms large over it. Imprisoned for twenty-seven years in a government penal institution on Robben Island, Mandela emerged from prison as the bearer of black South Africans’ long suffering, but also their hope for the future. The Tutus observe that Mandela’s personal journey from angry young radical to mature, gracious, and forgiving statesman was a dramatic and dynamic model for his people. “When Nelson Mandela went to jail, he was a very angry man. This global role model of forgiveness was not very forgiving on the day he stepped onto Robben Island to begin his prison sentence. It took many years in jail, years he spent cultivating a daily practice of forgiveness, for him to become the luminous example of tolerance who was able to put his wounded country on the road to reconciliation and healing. The man who walked into prison was not the man who invited his prison guard to be a VIP guest at his inauguration. That took time and effort” (page 38).

The Tutus ground their exploration into the dynamics of forgiving in contemporary scholarship as well as personal anecdote. They cite, among others, the work of psychologist Fred Luskin, author of *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*. Luskin cites scientific studies that show that forgiveness training reduces depression and anger and increases general well-being and hopefulness. “Research suggests that people who are forgiving report fewer health and mental problems, and fewer symptoms of stress.” Some evolutionary biologists suggest that human beings are hardwired to seek revenge and hurt back when hurt. It leads to the “revenge cycle”: violence, hurt/harm/loss, pain, choosing to harm, rejecting shared humanity, revenge payback, more violence. The Tutus propose an alternative, a “forgive cycle” in which the harmed person consciously chooses to heal by forgiving. Instead of being drawn into the cycle of revenge and rupture, human beings can choose to forgive and reconnect.

The heart of this book, in the practice of forgiveness, is the Fourfold Path of Forgiving. Each of the four steps—Telling the Story, Naming the Hurt, Granting Forgiveness, Renewing or Releasing the Relationship—is set forth in a chapter. The first step, Telling the Story, is introduced by Bishop Tutu’s powerful and personal memory of an incident that was humiliating and infuriating. In 1960 he and his wife Leah were driving their children to neighboring Swaziland to enroll them in a school that promised a better education. It was a long drive on a blisteringly hot day without air conditioning. Tutu saw a sign: “Walls Ice Cream Ahead.” He pulled the car into

the lot, and the family clambered out, desperate for the promise of cold ice cream. The boy behind the counter refused to serve them, ordering the family to go outside to the back window. “The rage seared me,” Tutu remembers (pages 68-69). Incidents like that can leave permanent scars on the soul. Somehow he must forgive that boy. It begins with telling the story, preferably to the perpetrator of the hurt. When that is not possible to do face-to-face, it is important to write the story in a letter or, at least, to tell it to someone, bringing the pain to words. The chapter includes a helpful section on “The Cost of Not Telling”: carrying the weight of the burden of pain alone, internalizing the pain where it festers and becomes more painful. Telling about it is the first step toward liberation.

The final step in the Fourfold Path, after Telling the Story, Naming the Hurt, and Granting Forgiveness, is Renewing or Releasing the Relationship. The chapter is particularly helpful in the realistic acknowledgement that sometimes a broken relationship cannot be renewed, in which case an intentional release can bring the matter to a livable resolution.

The Tutu’s make the remarkable and challenging proposal of two simple truths: there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of forgiveness. My first reaction, and I suspect I’m not alone, is the familiar skeptical trope: “What about Adolph Hitler and his despicable Nazi minions? What about Jihad John and his brutally murderous ISIS colleagues publically beheading journalists?” The authors remind us, however, that forgiving or not forgiving always involves a choice we make. “In South Africa we chose to seek forgiveness rather than revenge. That choice averted a bloodbath. For every injustice there is a choice....I have often said that in South Africa there would have been no future without forgiveness. Our rage and our quest for revenge would have been our destruction” (page 7).

Near the end of the book, the Tutus expand the context by proposing that one of the major issues confronting our nation and the world is the choice between retributive or restorative justice. Retributive justice, an eye-for-an-eye, practiced by most of the countries of the world including our own, is based on the premise that an injustice can only be made right when the perpetrator is made to pay for the harm by incarceration, physical punishment, or death. And in spite of promises of rehabilitation and restoration, our penal system feels and acts like retribution. The authors challenge this entire mentality and the penal justice systems it has spawned. It is both bracing and provocative: can a semblance of civil justice be produced by loving one’s enemies and doing good to those who harm?

As I finished reading the book, it occurred to me that this issue comes close to the heart of the Gospel. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us,” Jesus taught his followers to pray. The clear assumption is that personal forgiveness is organically related to the intentional act of forgiving others. It is fascinating to ponder the implications in regard to the seemingly intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The argument reminded me of another remarkable book I read recently, *Change of Heart: Justice, Mercy and Making Peace with my Sister’s Killer* by Jeanne Bishop. I was Bishop’s pastor and have witnessed and been inspired by her incredible journey. She is a practicing attorney and knows intimately the ins and outs of our criminal justice system. Bishop’s pregnant sister Nancy and her husband were brutally murdered by a teenage intruder in their suburban Chicago home. In her book, Bishop describes the full range of emotions she experienced, including her desire

for revenge and retributive justice. This young man should be punished severely for the ghastly evil he did and the pain he created. She also describes how her Christian faith led her gradually, over a period of several years, to change her mind about the killer's life sentence without parole and also finally to reach out to him in prison and to try to build a relationship. That relationship seems to be headed toward restoration, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu have created a unique structure in *The Book of Forgiveness*. Each of the ten chapters appears to have been written by Bishop Tutu. At the end of each chapter is a poetic reflection, making personal the ideas and concepts in the preceding chapter, followed by a helpful summary of the chapter's ideas, concepts, and proposals. I found myself wishing that there had been a similar chapter summary as I struggled with some of the turgid academic theology I have attempted to read and understand over the years. There are three additional sections at each chapter's end: a Meditation, Stone Ritual, and Journal Exercise.

Readers are urged to spend time in intentional meditation, to choose a small stone to use throughout the journey to forgiveness, and to keep a journal. It is no doubt a generational quirk, but I stayed with the recommended practices: carry my stone, trace my stone, mark my stone, up to the recommendation to whisper to my stone and tell it my story. I terminated the Stone Ritual at that point. Others, perhaps many others, will find it helpful. My recommendation is not to be put off by it.

The Tutus and the people they write about have endured horrific pain and suffering, more, I suspect, than most of us have or ever will. Out of their personal experiences and the nearly miraculous emergence of South Africa, mostly peacefully from apartheid with its obvious potential for vengeful, violent retaliation, Bishop Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu have given us a remarkable, relevant, and very helpful resource.