

The Agony and The Ecstasy

by Richard Foster

Any group of disciples who becomes serious about loving and caring has to deal with hurting and forgiving. This is the agony and the ecstasy of any real group experience. Human beings are such that life together always involves them in hurting one another in some way. People may want to disbelieve that, but even a brief exposure to real vulnerability will testify that it is so.

In a desperate scramble to avoid this fact of life, people will remain distant and superficial with everyone. They will run to other churches or groups at the first sign of differences. They will clam up in a tight little shell that does not know how to cry ...or laugh. Such a flight from reality is not life but death.

In another attempt to dodge this truth of human existence, some feel that if they could just become good enough, they would not hurt people any more. Yet in this world our very goodness will hurt people. Witness Jesus: his rectitude, by its very nature, threw the religious establishment into a tailspin.

If we want life, we must be prepared to hurt and be hurt. We simply must make peace with this fact. Once we accept this as a true perception into "life together," we can exert our energies learning how to deal with it, rather than attempting to avoid it.

Having once understood and accepted hurt as a fact of life, we are set free to see that it is all right to be hurt. Hurting is a normal and acceptable human experience.

Because people refuse to believe this, they have developed the religion of the stiff upper lip. Outwardly, they appear to be in complete control, fully able to handle all contingencies. They do not hurt, not them! They just develop ulcers, have heart attacks, and die of cancer.

Spiritual persons are especially hurt and hurtful. This is because they are more free than others to risk vulnerability. Caring and loving for them is not an option but a necessity, a vocation. Jesus hurt, hurt deeply. The stiff upper lip is not a sign of spirituality, but arrogance. The "great stone face" does not depict godliness, but pride.

Forgiving

Forgiving is essential in a community of hurt and hurtful persons. There is, however, such a total cultural confusion about what constitutes forgiveness, that we must dispel our fallacious notion before we can ever come to view forgiveness as a good thing. Four things are often mistaken for forgiveness.

First, we tend to confuse forgiveness with a spirit of indifference, the pretense that it does not matter. "Oh, that is all right; it really did not hurt me anyway!" That is not forgiving, it is lying. The truth is that these things matter a great deal and it does not help to avoid the issue.

Secondly, there is the mistaken idea that to forgive is to cease from hurting. Some feel that if they continue to hurt they have not really forgiven the other person. And they will condemn and flagellate themselves for their hard-heartedness. It is simply not true that the act of forgiving necessarily erases the hurt. Hurting is not evil. We may hurt for a long time to come.

Third, many would have us believe that in order to forgive we must forget. But this is not the case. To erase the memory would do violence to the human personality. We will remember but we will no longer need or desire to use the memory against others. The memory remains, the vindictiveness leaves.

Fourth, we trick ourselves into believing that to forgive means that the relationship can be just the same as before the offense. We might just as well make peace with the fact that the relationship will never be the same again. By the grace of God, it can be a hundred times better, but it will never be the same. We destroy ourselves and all those around us when we pretend that things are just the same as before.

The Rule of Christ

Jesus set forth the way by which genuine forgiveness can come into the community without destroying it. The key principle is found in the heart of that memorable chapter on forgiveness, Matthew 18. First, we are urged to go directly to the offended or offending party. But we cannot seem to do this. We play a little game by saying, "I don't want to hurt their feelings, so out of love I will not speak to them. Nothing really happened anyway." That is a lie. Love and lies do not mix.

And what is the purpose of our going to them? It is not to accuse or to correct, but to care for the person as a member of the body of Christ. To fail to confront is to fail to care. To care is to have feelings, to be angry, to be hurt, to experience pain. It is not wrong to have tough feelings nor to express them.

If the issue is not settled, we are urged to take two or three disciples with us who can be trusted and who are known for their discernment and empathy. When done in compassion, there is hardly a case where the problem is not resolved.

In the rarest situation, one further step is needed. We are to come with our concern to the entire community. Now, we will never be able to believe that this is a good thing until we understand that Jesus was referring to a kind of community which is seldom found in churches today. He was speaking of a community built on and saturated with a deep sense of trust. It is the kind of trust that knows that when we have opened our hearts before this group, we have reached out to the highest expression of God's grace. There is no other place to go, there is no higher court of appeal.

The high adventure of loving and caring will plunge us into the agony and sweep us into the ecstasy. If we choose life, there is no other way. He whose wounds signal both hurt and forgiveness will go with us through the depths as well as the heights.

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The Footwashing at Marlborough

THE STORY HAPPENED IN CHESTER COUNTY, Pennsylvania. It took place around the time of the Revolutionary War. Two Quakers lived on neighboring farms. One was Richard Barnard, an elder, who was a war tax refuser. Not able to support military endeavors because of religious conviction, he refused to pay all taxes directly related to war. His neighbor was Isaac Baily, a strong supporter of the Revolutionary War. Baily was known in the area as a contentious man, often involved in disputes with his acquaintances and even with his meeting. It would have been hard to find two more unlikely neighbors than these two Friends. A waterway ran between the Baily and Barnard home. As part of a dispute about property rights and water use, Isaac Baily dammed up the waterway.

God's call to peacemaking and reconciliation was very important to this Richard Barnard. He tried every conceivable method to work out a satisfactory solution with his neighbor. Following the advice of Matthew 18, he went to talk to Isaac, but to no avail. He took other Friends with him to speak with Isaac. The matter of the dammed waterway was put to arbitration. Friends decided Richard Barnard was in the right. But nothing would induce Isaac Baily to remove the dam or be reconciled to this neighbor.

The situation was a great

burden to Richard Barnard. Not only was he without the use of the water, but he suffered much inward discomfort as the result of the broken meeting; he was supposed to be a counselor and guide to others. Yet he could not solve his own dilemma.

One day a travelling minister came to visit. Richard Barnard opened his heart to the minister and described his problem. When he finished, the minister said simply, "there is more required of some than of others." Richard was struck by this response. He considered what more could be required of him. He had done all that seemed humanly possible to find a solution to the problem.

Richard held up the problem to God for direction and guidance. The answer that came was beyond all "techniques" for conflict resolution. It required giving up claims of being right and going to his neighbor in humility and forgiveness. Richard felt that God was calling him to wash Isaac's feet. The idea was so unusual, he kept trying to push it away. But in the end, he realized he would not have an inward sense of being faithful to God's leading unless he was willing to surrender his notions and be obedient.

Therefore one morning he filled a bowl with water from the waterway that divided the two men and went to Isaac Baily's house. It was so early that Isaac was still in bed. But Richard went up to his

bedroom and explained that he had come to wash Isaac's feet. He described how painful the strained relationship had been for him. He was here now, following God's leading, hoping they could be reconciled. Isaac sputtered and fussed, refusing to participate. But Richard persevered and began to wash his feet. Gradually Isaac became quiet and let Richard complete the washing. Then Isaac dressed and accompanied Richard to the door.

Later that day Isaac took a shovel to the waterway and dug away the dam. The water flowed again between the two farms. In the afternoon Isaac and his wife came to pay the Barnards a friendly visit, the first in a number of years. Richard was very grateful for the restored relationship.

The friendship between the two men remained deep and vibrant for the remainder of their lives. Some while after the problem with the waterway, Richard Barnard broke his leg in a lumbering accident. Isaac took care of him during his recovery. When Friends decided to build a new schoolhouse in the vicinity (a building which may also have functioned as a meetinghouse), the two friends contributed one hundred dollars and adjoining land at the juncture of their two properties for its construction. It was a fitting memorial of God's healing work in their lives.

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