

The Henri Nouwen Society

From Fear to Love:

Spiritual Grounding in Anxious Times

Video Meditations featuring Marjorie J. Thompson

Episode Four: Forgiving Enemies, Restoring Communion

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Welcome, everybody, to our fourth webcast in this series. Last week, we explored the idea of God's humility and how it guides our own. And we looked at how Jesus lives out the transforming power of selfless love and invites us to share that love through a life like his.

So, today, our focus is on forgiving enemies and restoring communion – a very profound, but difficult way to share Jesus's life more closely. Forgiveness actually calls us deeper into the themes of our earlier meditations. It speaks to the painful divisions of our day, whether those are in our families or our faith communities or our national politics. Our earlier examination of embracing our shadow – self-examination – can bear wonderful fruit in forgiving ourselves as well as others. And maybe we can remember here, too, that very deep connection that we spoke of between compassion for self and compassion for others. Forgiveness also expresses the blessed qualities of humility and mercy and making peace that we spoke of last week in relation to the Beatitudes. In the larger picture, forgiveness is really a choice to turn from our natural hurt and fear and anger to the spiritual freedom of love.

So, that takes us back to the large movement from fear to love, which is our overarching topic in these meditations. But the path from fear to love is especially tricky where forgiveness is concerned. Our difficulties with forgiveness are just legion. Even though I've written two small books on the subject, I really remain no more than a fellow traveler, a struggler on this path. What I hope to offer is a bit of help in sorting out a few of the knots that our struggles get us tied into.

Forgiveness is a fraught subject. So, to some, it feels like an emotional impossibility, whereas for others, it may be the most powerful path to healing and redemption that we know. And even when we believe in its power, which I certainly do, forgiveness is complex. One source of our struggle, I think, is that we misunderstand the very nature of forgiveness and confuse it with other things. So, here's my list of what forgiveness is not: First, it does not mean denying our hurt or suppressing our pain. Sometimes we think we're forgiving when we're just trying to avoid further conflict by sweeping our pain under the rug. Forgiving does not mean taking

on inappropriate responsibility for harm. That's a tactic used by some who maybe suffer from a weak sense of self, or an inflated sense of responsibility.

It's not resignation to victim or martyr status. Forgiveness is not a commodity that we can earn by demonstrating sufficient contrition or repentance. Even though I will say, we human beings do love melodrama, and sometimes that's what we turn our efforts at forgiveness into. Speaking of drama, most of us, I think, fall into the trap of seeing forgiveness as an emotion, or primarily as that. It's not merely a feeling, nor does it involve trying to manipulate ourselves or others into feeling certain things. Forgiveness has an objective reality that affects our emotions, but is not limited to them.

Maybe the most pernicious mistake we make is imagining that forgiveness means excusing or condoning bad behavior. But that flies in the face of our understanding of justice and accountability. Evil ideologies and destructive behaviors are not excusable. Forgiving is not tolerating the intolerable, but we can forgive a person whose ideas or actions remain condemned.

And finally, forgiving does not necessarily mean forgetting. That's a nice shorthand sometimes, but the way I put it in one of my books is, "Some things must be well-remembered if we are to find our way to a life-giving future."

So, if forgiveness is none of these things, what then is it? Here are a few descriptions that I have found useful over time. The first three actually are ways that I have characterized this in the past. The fourth is from someone else. Each of these offers a different emphasis, but they are not incompatible or mutually exclusive at all.

So, the first is: To forgive is to release one's self from the corrosive chains of endless anger, bitterness, and resentment. Now clearly here, the focus is on freeing myself. That's an important part of forgiveness.

Here's the second: To forgive is to release the person who wounded us from the sentence of our condemnation. This one focuses on freeing the offender, the other person.

The third one: Forgiveness is taking responsibility from my side to release the offender from the alienating effect of the offense on our relationship. So, the focus there is on restoring the relationship between us. It's not just on freeing me or on freeing the offender, but how it is between us.

And then the final one, which I have to say, I really like, comes from a woman named Mary Gordon: "To forgive is to give up the exhilaration of one's own unassailable rightness."

I think here we are releasing ourselves from a spirit of self-righteousness or what I might call "knocking ourselves off our own pedestal," which is especially helpful to do regularly, if we are in very visible positions of leadership. Human efforts to forgive are notoriously fragile; our emotional responses can become so consuming that we don't know how to extricate ourselves from resentment or the thirst to retaliate. I believe we need to start with God if we're going to make progress in this practice, because forgiveness originates with God, who first loves us. And when we begin with God, we see that forgiving others is not our first task. The first task is to receive God's forgiveness; and right away, this puts things in a different light. The focus shifts from the sins of others against us to our sins against God, against others, and even ourselves.

Reminding us of our own role in the morass of human alienation is the purpose of confession. And that is actually a form of the self-examination that we explored a few weeks back. In one of the prayers of my own tradition, we confess to God: We have not loved you with our whole heart. And we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

This failure of love is really a failure to grasp our true position within the human family in relation to God. Every time we recite the Lord's Prayer, we have an opportunity to remember our true position. There's a wonderful illustration of this from the late Archbishop Anthony Bloom, who tells the story of a French general during the revolutionary wars in France. His men had captured some of the enemy and wanted to shoot them. The general reluctantly agreed, but insisted that they should recite the Lord's Prayer aloud first. This they did. When they came to the words, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," they suddenly understood their situation and, weeping, they let their prisoners go. That's a true story. What those men understood in that moment was their common humanity with enemy soldiers. This is not unusual in war situations. They recognized that they were in this war together as fellow sinners, and they shared the human possibility of redemption by God's grace. Through the Lord's Prayer, they glimpsed what our friend Henri Nouwen calls, "the deeper communion that already exists below the stormy waves of our restless days."

Through forgiveness, these troops took part in what Henri describes as "the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family." As human beings, we are united by virtue of being created in the divine image, the same divine image. But sadly, we are also united in our brokenness. One pastoral counselor suggests that forgiveness is less something we do than something we discover, namely, that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them. The author of a book on family forgiveness, a woman named Kathleen Fisher, illustrates this from her own life. She writes: "I may be angry with a family member for criticizing me, keeping secrets, or failing to pull equal weight on family

projects. And then, to my chagrin, I catch myself doing the very same thing. The illusion that others are sinful and I am perfect bursts like a balloon, giving way to the realization that every one of us stands in need of mercy. No exceptions.”

We have difficulty perceiving our common humanity. We stumble over emotional blocks to forgiveness. So, what is going to help us move toward healing and reconciliation?

I think we can begin by acknowledging that authentic forgiveness more often is the result of a process than a specific decision point. Most of us grow slowly into new habits of mind and heart that make us forgiving persons. And we might also recognize that God understands far better than we our habitual resistance to change, and is far more patient with our lifelong process of spiritual maturation than we are with ourselves. When we are deeply wounded or afraid, much healing and assurance is needed to get us past our defenses. And in fact, until we feel assured of some measure of safety and love, efforts to remove our defenses may be very unwise. For example, those who have experienced physical or emotional abuse ought not to be counseled to forgive prematurely. Time is needed to remove themselves from the abusive relationship and to find secure sanctuary. Time is needed to heal, to strengthen, to find ground on which to stand with dignity and self-respect, because only then will a choice to forgive have authenticity and hold power to free the abused person from a kind of victim status.

Of course, we cannot guarantee anyone physical safety in this world. The parents of Ukraine and Yemen cannot guarantee their children safety in the face of war. The parents of school children in the United States cannot assure them of complete safety in the wake of ongoing mass-shootings. The families of those lost to increasingly destructive tornadoes, wildfires, or floods all have learned this painful lesson. Much as we crave security for our loved ones and for ourselves, life is filled with dangers we cannot control. And while our choices could make a real difference in some situations, the great spiritual traditions teach that suffering and death are part of the fabric of human life. No one escapes them. Yet, our spiritual traditions also hold the vision of a realm that intersects this world yet transcends it. Our suffering and death are not the final word from a divine perspective.

So, it is possible to be assured of ultimate spiritual safety in relation to this larger realm. Henri Nouwen discovered it when he embraced his own belovedness within God’s heart. And once he found that, he encouraged all of us to find our true security in that same, great heart. As one of Nouwen’s greatest legacies, his witness to this core truth was expressed in many of his later books. Here’s how I would summarize his words in several of those books: We are each and all God’s beloved children, sons and daughters of the Most High, forever embraced by a love that will not let us go. Both in and beyond this world, we are held secure in the hands of utmost compassion and mercy. God’s love for us is original, preceding our birth, preceding all experience of being wounded by the imperfect love of parents, siblings, classmates,

teachers, friends, or colleagues. It is God's first love from which we were fashioned and within which we are enabled to love others.

Yet, few of us know our belovedness to God, to others, or to ourselves. You know, we don't see ourselves primarily as beings who bear the imprint of divine life in our souls. I don't introduce myself by saying, "Hi, my name is Marjorie. I am a beloved child of God, like you."

We typically introduce ourselves through our roles or maybe social connections. Yet, our identity will always feel insecure when rooted in roles, achievements, or relationships that can change. Beneath the external facts, we hold many internalized messages of self-criticism and rejection. In fact, we suffer a whole menagerie of negative self-images: ugly, stupid, slow, weak, untalented, inadequate, indecisive, unlucky, inauthentic - we could go on and on. Bullies use such words to belittle others and to disguise their own self-rejection. And yet, we often bully ourselves with the same kind of language. Even when our lives appear highly successful to others, we can feel like frauds trying not to blow our cover. You may remember a few weeks ago, I described to you how doing shadow work revealed my own struggles with feeling fraudulent. That was true earlier in my life, especially.

So, it helps to admit that we all have flaws and limitations. And yet, at the same time, we need to remember that no weakness completely defines us or anyone else. We are all people with a deeper identity, whose beauty and even glory seem too good to be true, which I guess is why we tend not to trust it. It seems too good to be true. Theresa of Avila, 16th century, had an astonishing sense of the soul's true value. In her most famous book, *Interior Castle*, she writes, "I don't find anything comparable to the magnificent beauty of a soul and its marvelous capacity. Indeed, our intellects, however keen, can hardly comprehend it, even as they cannot comprehend God."

She goes on: "We know we have souls, but we seldom consider the precious things that can be found in this soul, or who dwells within it, or its high value. Consequently, little effort is made to preserve its beauty."

Aren't those lovely words? The saints confirm that we are created from an eternally loving heart in order to participate in the infinite reality of divine love. We sometimes call this participation communion. And if human beings are created for communion, it is surely because communion describes the central mystery of the cosmos.

According to early Christian theologians, everything that exists owes its being to divine love and is interwoven in an all-encompassing circle of love. The circle of love is a metaphor for divine reality. So, in words attributed to Saint Augustine and Meister Eckhart --we're speaking early in Christian tradition here-- Thomas Merton, 20th century, reminds us of those words:

“God is the circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” God is the circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Now, those are words guaranteed to explode our rational circuits.

Augustine and Eckhart are drawing on scripture. In the very first chapter of Colossians, Paul proclaims that in Christ, all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible. All things have been created through him and for him. . . and in him, all things hold together, (verses 15 to 17).

When I reflect on these words, I find myself beholding the deeply precious image of all creation held together in a vast, dynamic web, glistening with the glory of original love. Paul’s vision of Christ is cosmic and united. And that gives me immense hope.

Henri expands on this theme in his own way. He writes, “The experience of being called the Beloved is the experience of communion. The word union speaks against alienation, separation, division, conflict, competition, rivalry, evoking instead relationship, intimacy, and mutuality.”

Those words are so much Henri’s words, are they not? Of course, our actual experience of life in this world is filled with division, conflict, competition, and rivalry. Forgiveness is needed only because we have damaged the original unity of divine communion. The Bible calls that damage sin, and the essence of sin is alienation. Alienation is separation, opposition, the inability to recognize and embrace that beautiful, glistening web of love threading through all the cosmos.

We are so deeply convinced of our separation from one another, from creation, from God. And that conviction of separateness gets us into a heap of trouble. Instead of seeing one another as sisters and brothers in one human family, we separate ourselves into friends and enemies, and we are taught – culture teaches us – to love our friends and hate our enemies. We follow that script to a fault, despite Jesus’ teaching to love our enemies and pray for them.

So, who exactly are these enemies that we are called to forgive? Let me read you a part of a very powerful article written back in 2006, by a professor of literature, Marilyn McEntyre. You have a longer version of this among the handouts in the accompanying PDF to this meditation. Marilyn writes:

I do have enemies, and I know who you are. You are the ones who hurt the people I love. You subject my children to propaganda and soul-sucking media manipulation. You try to make my husband and sons believe that masculinity is measured by

willingness to kill and to make money. You drive my daughters towards self-destructive behaviors in the name of desirability. You poison the air, the soil, the water, the spirit . . . and damage their health for profit. You are the ones who set me at war with myself. You target my weaknesses and sins - my greed, my pride, my gluttony, my fear - and tempt me to measure my own worth by the satisfaction of my basest desires. So I eat too much, I work for public recognition, I buy what I do not need, I take my part in racism and paranoia. You lure and you lie and you threaten. You live in Washington and in the Middle East and in Hollywood and in middle America and in my household and in my heart. So when Jesus says, "Love your enemies," does he mean you? And how shall I love you when you do evil? And why should I?

Are these not our questions? Naming those we consider our enemies is a good place to start. And these days I can say my enemies tend to be political figures in my own nation, or world leaders that I perceive as ruthless autocrats. But I imagine that anyone who has lost a child or another loved one to a mass shooter would naturally see the murderer as an enemy. And even when these tragedies do not affect our own family members directly, we feel pain, fear, and anger toward those who commit such atrocities. There are people I very easily and not infrequently pray against. Yet, if I truly believe my own words, that spiritually speaking, we are all siblings in a unified web of life, I must be willing to see the humanity in my enemies and the enemy in my humanity.

This is precisely where Marilyn McEntyre goes with her essay, which includes this hard-hitting paragraph:

I believe that I must love you because I am like you. Every year I live teaches me the truth that nothing human is alien to me. So when I look at your hypocrisy, your brutality, your self-serving propaganda, your abuse of power, your betrayal of innocence, I must open my mind and heart to that in me, which is reflected in the mirror you provide. Perhaps it is latent rather than manifest. Perhaps its effects appear to be more innocuous. Comparing my evil with yours, to reassure myself that I am among the righteous, "misses the mark" completely. Counterintuitive though it be, your sin and my sin, your darkness and my darkness, merit the same condemnation and have been covered by the same amazing grace.

Do people deserve our forgiveness? No, of course not. This is not the measure God uses to forgive. It's not what forgiveness is about, deserving. Do we deserve God's forgiveness? Grace can only be grace, if we do not deserve it.

McEntyre offers us several ways to love our enemies, including telling the truth as carefully and caringly as I can, and finding ways to sit down with you and find out what it is like to be you. I commend her full essay to your reflection and prayer.

This call to love our enemies reminds me of Richard Rohr's wisdom that I spoke of in our second week, on holding the shadow and cultivating compassion. Maybe you remember these two steps that Rohr commends, which help us move from discerning judgment to unexpected compassion, rather than to our default of condemning judgment. He uses the language of dual thinking and non-dual response, which may not be very familiar to us. But the essence of what he's speaking of is this: We need to be utterly clear about the difference, the distinction between what is life-giving and what is destructive in human community. So, with respect to matters of justice, inclusion, violence, or greed, we need to be exercising what Rohr calls "clearheaded, dualistic thinking." Making those distinctions, the either/or distinctions - that's the dualism. You know, Jesus does this when he lifts up the dichotomy (that's another word for the dualism) between those who feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned - and those who don't.

There's a real difference there. So, dualistic clarity gives us our moral compass. But step two, instead of condemning people who make destructive choices, we can turn to compassion, which helps us to discover our common humanity. And that's what Rohr calls the "non-dual response," the unifying response.

What might that response look like in practice? Maybe, sitting down in a live conversation or maybe in prayer, we do our very best to empathize with our enemy. That is, to understand what they see as good, what they fear, what they hope, what moves them to action. I think that if we allow ourselves to do something like that, in that process, we are likely to discover some resonances, some sense of connection that we feel in our own hearts and minds, as we really listen to another or make the effort to empathize with them. I think it's very important when we sense those resonances in ourselves, that we accept that part of us for what it is, without trying to deny or rationalize it away. And in that process, maybe we discover that at least part of the problem is what we can call the enmity within our own divided selves, because none of us are completely without contradiction or hypocrisy.

Then what would it mean to be gentle with our inner enemy instead of harsh and condemning? Most of us are very hard on ourselves. We often find it easier to forgive others than ourselves. So, the starting point, it seems to me, is to accept with patience and a desire to understand whatever it is we find in the dark corners of our hearts. We can always ask the Spirit how she sees this part of us. (I say that because the Hebrew word for spirit and wisdom is feminine. Both of those words are feminine words.) Can we see God as the Great Physician who regards all human sin as an expression of woundedness? If so, we can ask God how this wound might be healed and then listen, yes, just listen deeply, patiently for a guiding word of

life. Forgiving ourselves involves accepting our wounds and opening ourselves to grace, just acknowledging we don't have, within our typical ego self, what it takes to be healed. We have to turn to that deeper wisdom, the One who dwells within - whether we call it the indwelling Christ or indwelling Spirit.

God's project in this world is reconciliation and restored communion. Every act of forgiveness, however small, re-weaves the frayed fabric of human community. Forgiveness is not just compassionate. It's expansive. It embraces as worthy of love everyone, regardless of who they are or what they have done.

There's a wonderful story from the U.S. war in Iraq that I think beautifully illustrates these qualities of compassion and expansiveness in a forgiving spirit. A Christian peacemaking team was on its way from Baghdad to Amman when the driver lost control of the car and landed in a deep ditch, leaving several in the company badly wounded. An Iraqi civilian stopped to help, and packed the injured into his car, driving them to the nearby town of Rutba, a town of 20,000, that had just three days before been largely destroyed by American and British airstrikes.

At the only medical facility still standing, the Americans were warmly welcomed by the staff, and an Iraqi doctor treated the wounded, apologizing for sparse medicine and the fact that the only ambulance that might have transported them to Jordan had been destroyed by the bombs. Imagine apologizing to Americans for the bombs that had just been dropped on your town. When these Americans offered to pay for their care, the Iraqis refused. "We treat everyone in our clinic: Muslim, Christian, Iraqi, or American," said the doctor. "We are all part of the same family, you know?"

Beneath that physician's generosity lay a vision of our common humanity, and his forgiving spirit helped to re-knit the frayed fabric of connection between two nationalities and two religions, right in the middle of a war. Forgiveness restores communion, even as resentment keeps us trapped in alienation. Without forgiveness, or I should say, withholding forgiveness is actually an attempt to control that ironically controls us. It consigns us to live under the stress of our unresolved pain and fear and anger, making us unhappy with ourselves and others, and erecting barriers between us and God.

If we cannot forgive, we cannot truly receive the mercy God offers us, either. Not because God is punishing us, but simply because an unforgiving heart in itself blocks the gift of grace. Forgiveness frees us from the past for a future of new possibilities. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed his most bitter opponents with these words: "One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process."

So, without either capitulating to evil or cooperating with injustice, Dr. King's goal was reconciliation with his enemies, not merely victory over them. His hope lay in the vision of a just, equitable, and peaceful world that he called the beloved community. The beloved community. We are nowhere near fulfilling his dream, but Dr. King's witness gives me hope that, God willing, we too can bring transforming love to bear on the polarized and conflictual times that we are living in now. A forgiving spirit is key, moving us from fear and resentment to compassion and understanding.

The most moving expression I have ever found of a human being desiring to restore this deeper communion comes in the following words, left by an anonymous Jewish prisoner in a German concentration camp in World War II. Listen carefully to these words:

Peace to all men of evil will! Let there be an end to all vengeance, to all demands for punishment and retribution . . . Crimes have surpassed all measure, they cannot be grasped by human understanding. . . And so, weigh not their sufferings on the scales of thy justice, Lord, and lay not these sufferings to the torturers' charge, to exact a terrible reckoning from them. . . Put down in favor of the executioners, the informers, the traders, and all men of evil will, the courage, the spiritual strength of the others, their humility, their lofty dignity, . . . their love, their ravaged, broken hearts that remained steadfast, confident in the face of death itself. . . Let all this, O Lord, be laid before thee for the forgiveness of sins. . . let the good and not the evil be taken into account! And may we remain in our enemies' memory not as their victims, not as a nightmare, not as haunting specters, but as helpers in their striving to destroy the fury of their criminal passions. There is nothing more that we want of them.

The prisoner who wrote those words, those astonishing words, was so empty of ego, so devoid of any spirit of retaliation or retribution, so surrendered to God's greater love and healing purpose. It is truly hard for us to comprehend. And yet, I think any one of us might pray such words when we truly see communion as the heart of creation and us as part of that. So, my prayer for us is that we learn to welcome one another back, even as we have been welcomed into this ever-expanding, incredibly beautiful, wonderful circle of God's love.

Now, I do want to say a few words about our personal practice here, to help us participate in God's project of reconciliation. We can learn a few not-easy, but very simple practices. One is writing a letter of forgiveness. One is writing a good apology. One is a delightful new idea offered by a friend of mine, which I've developed a little bit and call "imagining God's letter to you." God's letter to you that is intended as a help in forgiving one's self. All of these are described for you in the PDF handout that I mentioned.

So, right now, for your practice in this coming week, I want to encourage you to identify one person you need to forgive for offending or wounding you, and one person that you truly wish would forgive you for something you said or did, that damaged your relationship.

In relation to the first person, try your hand at writing a letter of forgiveness. Clarify your thoughts and feelings, and especially consider the tone that you choose in speaking to the heart of your offender. You may need to revise more than once. When the letter speaks your truth, honestly, in language that avoids retaliatory wounding, then you can pray about whether or when to send that letter.

In relation to the second person, I encourage you to practice writing what I call a "clean apology," a good apology, using the guidelines in your handout. And this, too, may take a little bit of thoughtful revision. In my own experience of doing this, the hardest part for me is avoiding self-justifying explanations. That's a challenge, but a very important thing to avoid.

And then finally, again, I would encourage you to read the whole of Marilyn McEntyre's piece, "How do I love thee: A letter to my enemies." Underline the words and phrases that draw your heart or especially challenge you, and note down your insights and struggles in a journal, so that that really becomes effective in your own life in a deeper way.

Well, my friends, all blessings in this labor of love, and I will see you next week for our final webcast on transforming anxiety into hospitality. Thank you so much.