

Families Forgive a Murderer

Many of us remember the horror we felt on June 17, 2015, when the news reported that a 21-year-old white supremacist named Dylann Roof had mercilessly slaughtered nine African American adults during a Bible study at the Emanuel African American Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

But for some of us, the horror of that terrible event was replaced with awe at the response of some of the family members of the victims when they confronted Dylann Roof in court. They said things to him like, "I forgive you. You took something very precious from me. But I forgive you."

Another person said, "I forgive you; my family forgives you. But we would like you to take the opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the One who matters most: Christ."

Still another said, "May God have mercy on you."

As one pastor described it, "These people had just gone through the most terrible storm you can imagine. But there was no hatred in their voices. Sorrow, yes, but no hatred. Only love and forgiveness."

Can you imagine a more powerful witness to the grace of Jesus Christ than being able to forgive a murderer of someone you loved dearly? Forgiveness is tough business.

The great church father Augustine once said that sometimes people in his church omitted the phrase from the Lord's Prayer that says, "and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." They "just passed over that phrase silently," he said, because they knew it would be lying for them to say that phrase out loud."

Forgiveness is hard. It may be the most difficult requirement of our faith. But it will be easier if we acknowledge that we ourselves have been forgiven, and if we admit that forgiveness is the most powerful witness we have to the activity of grace in our own lives.

Forgiveness is a positive activity necessary to the healing and wholeness of our own hearts.

Is there someone you need to forgive – an unfaithful spouse, an overbearing parent, a friend who stabbed you in the back, an employer who has taken advantage of you? God has forgiven each of us for every soiled thought, act and deed of which we are capable. Can we not forgive one another?

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter