

Freedom: 12-Step Spirituality for Everyone Who Struggles
Steps 8 and 9: Admitting That We Have Hurt Others; Making Amends
Matthew 5:21-26

I read once about a professor of Ethics who begins her class every semester by asking her students, “When you are eighty years old, what would you most like to be able to say about your life?” Every year, a lot of students answer that when they’re 80, close to the end of their lives, they want to be able to say that they have no regrets. That they wouldn’t do *anything* in their lives differently.ⁱ That’s a pretty tall order, don’t you think? Maybe it’s only possible when you’re 19 or 20—to think that you might live your whole life without making any mistakes so big that you will continue to regret them. Nothing that you’d look back on and wish you had the chance to do over. Maybe that kind of youthful confidence is a good thing. Maybe if you could hold that intention, it would change the way you make decisions, control your words every time you open your mouth. But I think that if you get to 80 and don’t have any regrets about how you’ve lived, it’s probably less about good living, and more about not being honest and reflective about your life.

We live in a culture that tells us not to look backward with regret. That re-thinking your past is a waste of time, an invitation to useless feelings of guilt. The messages we hear clearly, I think, are: move on; just keep looking forward—not back. Make adjustments in your behavior and your attitude if you need to, but if you’ve made mistakes, it’s more important to change things going forward than it is to try to repair past damage.

Today we come to the eighth and ninth steps in the 12-step spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous. These steps say: Make a list of all the persons you have harmed and then make amends to them. That this is part of your own healing, part of the path to your freedom. For many of us, this seems counter-intuitive. Not helpful, probably not necessary. Maybe it’s important for an alcoholic or addict to reflect on the people they’ve harmed, you might think. But me? I’ve lived out of good intentions! If I’ve hurt someone, they’ll understand that I am not that kind of person! What’s the value in re-hashing old hurts?

Without intending it, I think maybe our Christian theology has led us in the same direction. We are forgiven, we have learned from the beginning. It is right at the center of the Christian message: that God loves us regardless of what we have done in the past. It seems us that it is pretty easy for God to forgive us. Isn’t that enough to clear up all the debris we might have left in our path? Shouldn’t everyone else forgive us too, for whatever offense we might have caused? We never set out to hurt anyone. Can’t we all just live positively into the future? Hasn’t God already taken care of all the forgiveness we will ever need?

It’s not that we don’t think our faith requires us to think about other people. But most of our focus is on forgiving *other* people. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” we pray. The hard part, it seems, is our work of forgiving others.

But what if the messes in the world are not just about the wrongs other people have done? What if I’m one of the people whose acts require forgiveness from someone else?

The passage from the Sermon on the Mount that we read this morning reminds us that Jesus thought about this too. “If you enter your place of worship [Jesus said] and you’re getting to the moment that really counts, and you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you…” stop everything. “Abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.”

This is one of those parts of Jesus’ teaching that most of us have never taken seriously. Is he suggesting we put an intermission into our worship services? I’m kidding, but Jesus seems to have been quite serious about this command to stop everything. And he didn’t put any qualifications on *how* wrong you have to have been before this applies to you. If a *friend* has a *grudge* against you, Jesus says. Even if it happened a long time ago and the other person should have gotten over it. Even if you can justify all your actions in your own mind. Even if you think your friend is being unreasonably hyper-sensitive—go work it out. *Then* come back and work on your relationship with God. Not because God can’t forgive you until you clean things up with the other person. But because *you* can’t be free until you do.

I think Jesus knew that living in the muck of relationships that are broken—especially when they have been bruised by our own actions—makes it impossible for us to live out *any* other part of the Gospel. You can’t see the needs of the poor when you’re stewing about the argument you had last night with your spouse or your mother. You can’t worship God when your mind is spinning with stories about why it was really someone else’s fault that you lashed out with unkindness. You can’t hear a new truth about your own life when you’re focused on how you *had* to repeat that scathing story about your co-worker. Jesus knew that when we’re carrying the weight of the harm we’ve done to other people, our natural reaction is to isolate—separate ourselves. Not only from the person whose forgiveness we need, but from everyone who might the truth of our imperfection.

It is not good to be crushed by the weight of the past. But neither is it freeing to pretend that the past doesn’t matter. The reality of our lives is that we *all* need forgiveness. *No one* lives to be 80 with nothing to regret. We make mistakes, and sometimes we do things that are downright cruel. And then we need forgiveness not just from God, but from one another.

So what do we do? What does it mean to “make amends” to another person? Let me say first that one of the very important pieces of this step in the 12-step program is to know when *not* to do it. Make amends, the ninth step says, *except when to do so would injure them or others*. There is no virtue in clearing your conscience if what you’re doing is taking the burden off of your back and put it on someone else’s. Will you do *more* harm by telling this person a wrong that they haven’t known before? Think about that first. Let it stop you, even if you were ready to speak with absolute sincerity and remorse.

If it *is* appropriate to go directly to the person you have wronged, making amends begins with an apology, saying you’re sorry for what you did. Not sorry for the other person’s anger, not sorry they “took things the wrong way”. Sorry for your own actions. There are a lot of examples of bad apologies out there, especially in public life, often by politicians. You know what sounds sincere and what isn’t.

Second—and this is important—making amends is about action. Is there something you can do to right the wrong you’ve done? If you reneged on a promise, do what you can to fulfill it. If you stole something, give it back. If you ruined someone else’s reputation, set the record straight. Ultimately, there are some things you cannot repair. You can’t take away the emotional pain you’ve caused someone else. You can’t un-kill something you have let die. You can’t restore trust that has been violated; you can’t un-do the past. But you can work on living differently. You earn back trust by being trust-worthy. You show someone that you still love them by changing the behavior that caused them pain before. You pay attention to what has needed your attention all along.

I am not recommending guilt to you. Someone wise once said, “Guilt is the price we’re willing to pay for not changing our behavior.” Give up the guilt. It does no one any good. But that thing that makes you feel guilty—let it be prompt in you, a thorn in your side that makes you uncomfortable enough to seek your own transformation, to do your work.

Finally—and maybe this is the most important thing—making amends is about listening. If you grew up in this country and are of a certain age, you’ll remember the movie *Love Story*, and its most famous line: “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” That may be one of the stupidest things ever said, but I can think of one way in which it might be true. Saying “I’m sorry” is sometimes not enough. Saying you’re sorry is about *your* feelings. It communicates: I don’t want to feel bad about this any more. It says nothing about the feelings of the person you have harmed.

Making amends is mostly about *not* speaking. It’s about listening. Listening without making excuses for your behavior, or preparing a defense. Listening to the other person talk about how what you did affected her. Paying attention, inviting him to be honest; and then being receptive, working at understanding things from their perspective. It means standing without any defenses in another person’s reality, without insisting that they enter yours.

And then, after you’ve listened, making amends means asking for the other person’s forgiveness, knowing that they may not be able to offer it. Asking is hard. It makes you vulnerable, because it puts you at the other person’s mercy. Asking for forgiveness says, “I need something from you.” It’s admitting that you cannot move on without something the other person has to give. And it may require patience. It’s possible that this relationship cannot be fixed right now, and you may not be able to fix it at all.

Jesus didn’t say exactly what we should do if we go to that person who has the grudge against us and we aren’t able to make things right. It seems to me that it throws us right back to that first step, of admitting that there’s something in our lives that we’re powerless over—so powerless that all we can do is surrender it up to God. Maybe that’s exactly what we’re supposed to keep coming back to. Maybe until we go back and keep working on those relationships, we’ll *never* be able to worship God fully. Maybe that’s how much we need each other. And I think that’s *exactly* what Jesus was trying to tell us.

ⁱ From “Regretfully Yours”, by David Paul Deavel, in *The Christian Century*, September 8, 2009