

Finding Strength to Forgive



ast time I travelled to Uganda, I heard of a t-shirt that had become popular. It said, “I love the LRA.” This shocked and surprised me, since in the 1990s and into the early part of this decade, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) was notorious for abducting children and training them to become child soldiers who murdered, raped, and pillaged northern Uganda. Nonetheless, the t-shirt made me think hard about the nature of forgiveness. The small print on the shirt goes on to say, “90% of the LRA are abducted children.”

So often, when we are wounded, all we see is the bold print, the offense. We almost feel that God’s call to love our enemies is a call to ignore wrongdoing. But, if we are able to move beyond the offence that blocks our vision, we find that the perpetrator is often weak and wounded, just like us.

The rural communities of northern Uganda have endured unspeakable suffering. No community was left unscathed, and in many ways every family has good reason to succumb to hopelessness, hard-heartedness, bitterness, apathy—in other words, death! I simply cannot imagine the strength, faith, and perseverance demanded from people who have suffered physical violence and/or lost close family members during the civil war. I wonder, would I be able to endure and move on if I had suffered so much pain? But every time I visit northern Uganda, I see that many families do more than move on: they rise up and bless others with overt joy and generosity.

Many women in northern Uganda are beautiful examples of the power of forgiveness. By nature of their place in society as the caretakers of their families, they have had to forgive their offenders and move on to fulfill their responsibilities. Whenever I talk with women who have lost loved ones, they always conclude by identifying their hope in Christ as what

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

— Ephesians 4:32-33

sustains them. They have told me that God loves us so much that he allowed his Son to die so we could be forgiven; how could they not forgive what has been done to them? I have always heard these women give God the glory for the strength they needed to forgive.

Our partners in northern Uganda depend on Christ's power to forgive people as they work with local communities. One leader, Deleo, told me about a class he was teaching. Before the class began, a young man began bragging about horrific things he had done to other people, in part to intimidate his fellow classmates and the teacher. Before he could teach, Deleo had to forgive that young man and affirm him as a potential catalyst for positive change rather than an agent of destruction. The teenager and many men and boys like him need to move from self-hatred into a place of allowing Jesus to forgive what they have done. Only then will there be true peace in northern Uganda.

I am privileged to work with people who demonstrate the power that the Holy Spirit gives to forgive others and become servants, even of those who have hurt us. As we comprehend the magnitude of what Christ has done for us, may our love and compassion overflow into blessing for others.

— PAT KLEVER, SENIOR PROGRAMS ADVISOR, LIFEWATER INTERNATIONAL

An' finally somethin' spoke out in me an' said, 'This is Jesus!' An' I spoke out with all my might, an' says I, 'This is Jesus! Glory be to God!' . . . An' I begun to feel such a love in my soul as I never felt before—love of all creatures. An' then, all of a sudden, it stopped, an' I said, Dar's de White folks dat have abused you, an' beat you, an' abused your people—think o' them! But then there came another rush of Love through my soul, an' I cried out loud—"Lord, I can love even de White folks!" Honey, I jes' walked round and round in a dream. Jesus loved me! I knowed it—I felt it. Jesus was my Jesus. Jesus would love me always.

— Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (Penguin, 1998), 107-108.

More new life springs
from acts of forgiveness
than anything else.
— Eugene Peterson



REFLECT

- Who do you know that demonstrates the power of forgiveness?
- Is there a time when the Holy Spirit has empowered you to forgive someone?
- What kind of reconciliation needs to happen in your family, church, or broader community? What steps might you be able to take to begin the process of forgiveness?
- What has giving up something voluntarily during Lent taught you about yourself?

IN SONG | There is a Redeemer | Keith Green, 1982

There is a Redeemer, Jesus, God's own Son,
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
Holy One.

Jesus my Redeemer, Name above all names,
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
Oh, for sinners slain.

Thank you oh my Father, For giving us Your Son,
And leaving Your Spirit 'til
The work on Earth is done.

When I stand in Glory, I will see His face,
And there I'll serve my King forever,
In that Holy Place.



RESPOND

Lord, you have washed us clean! May your Holy Spirit fill us with the power to forgive others as you have forgiven us.