

# Forgiveness in a World Aflame

by Christine Betz Hall

For those of us watching the bloody conflicts in Israel-Palestine and Ukraine from thousands of miles away, praying it all will end, I'm wondering what forgiveness means. I'm also looking ahead to another tumultuous election year in our own nation, wondering how forgiveness could contribute to peace. While writing a recent pamphlet for Pendle Hill (PHP #480, *Forgiveness: Freed to Love*, April 2023), I reflected on the essential inner experience of forgiveness as "release into the Spirit." It doesn't depend on another person's actions, but it's not about forgetting or letting anyone off the hook either. Forgiveness-as-release is separate from reconciliation or restoration of relationship. It happens between the forgiver and the Spirit. When practiced within and between us, this approach to forgiveness frees us to love more, lessening thoughts and actions that contribute to ongoing cycles of violence. Forgiveness builds peace.

Our own lives and relationships are the settings in which to begin releasing our mistakes and hurts into the Holy. Once we have a personal sense of how the "release" happens within us, we may experience an invitation to practice forgiveness on a world scale.

I am not advocating any particular government policy, nor do I presume to tell a Jew or Palestinian what forgiveness might offer in the middle of the conflagration. If someone asks me whether large-scale forgiveness is mine to give, I respond, "No, it's God's." My part in forgiveness is to intentionally join the endless flow of Divine Mercy, which is greater than any person or nation deserves, and is a miracle that confounds my own limited reason. I choose to trust the Holy with my grief, with my reactivity, even with my desire to take sides.

In our violent times, I've been stretching to remember the ancient vision of peace, the prophetic assurance that the wolf will dwell with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6). Imagine Israelis and Palestinians feasting at the same table, Ukrainians and Russians walking in mutual care, weapons of war remade into farming tools to help feed the hungry (Isaiah 2:4). Imagine people of all ethnicities, religions, countries, political leanings, capacities, and economic means living in harmony and plenty. The inspired seers of old declared that justice will roll down like waters (Amos 5:24), and humanity will study war no more (Isaiah 2:4).

This vision has been called God's Peaceable Realm (Commonwealth, Kingdom), a Holy Ecology, the Beloved Community. This vision of peace is foolishness to many people. But perhaps the Peaceable Realm is more like an alternate reality, present while not yet realized. Immersion in Spirit rearranges what we see in the here and now, what it means, and how we might respond. Forgiveness is one practical way we can turn toward this vision of peace.

Early Quaker George Fox lived the vision. He refused to participate in the violent conflicts of his day, claiming, "I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars. . . I was come in to the covenant of peace which was before wars and strifes were" (1651).

A covenant is a sacred pact. Imagine George Fox's binding commitment to God to think and act only in peace. His sense of the world had shifted; he was free from any need for violence. Along with examples like Fox and other early Friends, like Francis and Clare of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesus of Nazareth, and peacemakers throughout the ages, we too are called to a covenant of Divine Peace.

When we choose forgiveness, even in the midst of war, we participate in that covenant. To apply forgiveness to nations, to unyielding cycles of injustice, to oppressive powers, new phrasing may help. Forgiveness could mean, "We release the situation into Divine Mercy."

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In the earliest Hebrew scriptures, the term "mercy" is derived from the root word for "womb." God's mercy is "womb love" – nurturing, sheltering, loving-kindness toward those who suffer and those who do wrong. It's one of the essential qualities of YHWH, the One known by many names.

In a world of terrorists, warmongers, arms dealers, soldiers, and inflammatory political leaders, we can let go of our own grief, anger, despair, judgements, and hopelessness, into the Source of Loving-Kindness. We can release all persons, no matter who they are, into the endless and ever-flowing river of Divine Mercy.

“Releasing the situation into Divine Mercy” can help us choose not to hurt others in thought, word, or action. When condemnation or anger energizes us more than compassion, forgiveness can heal and open us to care for all persons, both victims and malevolent actors. We can forgive ourselves for our natural reactions and renew our commitments to peace.

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It’s clear to me that no “sides” exist in the covenant of peace. Instead, it points toward a paradoxical Greater Reality, where enemies are allies and none harms another. With forgiveness, I can see complex international conflicts more like kaleidoscopic color schemes than like black and white alternatives. In the case of Israel-Palestine, the gray areas have been made very real to me by two friends who have families on the ground on either “side.” My friends have opened my heart to the complicated and tragic interplays of histories, relationships, dreams, and traumas in that land.

Forgiveness as release into God’s Mercy – this approach might not fix the problems around us, but it can energize us to act in a different spirit. Forgiveness may free us to lament. As I watch the unfolding horrors in the Middle East, my heart weeps with Jesus, who prayed for his killers, “Forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). I experience honest, healthy grief at the brokenness of the human condition, my own as well as distant killers. Forgiveness invites us all to melt humbly into the Spirit, with a sincere and wrenching, “God forgive *us*; we don’t know what *we* are doing!”

Release into the Mercy of God doesn’t make us passive observers. We’re still called to take actions that help and heal. With renewed energy, Divine resources can work in us and through us to begin improbable healing, bring renewal out of our messes, and guide us into fullness of Life, individually and in community. That’s what the Spirit does.

Forgiveness is a bold, counter-cultural spiritual choice. If we don’t sense the revolutionary nature of this spiritual

practice, we’re missing something pivotal. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said in his powerful 1963 essay “Loving Your Enemies,” “We must develop and maintain the power to forgive. [A person] who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.” In concrete practice, forgiveness is a way to love enemies – neighbors with offensive yard signs, politicians on the “other” side, and the nations and armies that oppress and murder.

As the 2024 election year begins, you may feel moved to help prevent violence in your own community. If so, consider participating in this project of a Quaker ministry colleague of mine, Emily Provance: “Choosing Hope: Election Violence Prevention” ( <http://tinyurl.com/provance-2024-elections> ). May our hearts be opened to the Spirit’s call to the Covenant of Peace. ♣

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