

Christianity Teaches Forgiveness - And That Includes You

By Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

(UMCom) -- I had spent the day in self-recrimination when an e-mail came asking if I'd address a huge oversight in Christian practice - self-forgiveness. Christianity speaks often and easily about forgiving others, but "what seems to have been forgotten," the e-mail said, "is how to forgive ourselves for mistakes brought on by our own poor choices." I'm not saying God sent this, but I got the message. I had some work to do. The prior evening when my oldest son returned home from his high school graduation, he asked, "Where were you after the ceremony?" He described how other families had gathered to take pictures while we made a beeline to our van, proud to have beat the crowds and traffic. We felt horrible.



They (small failures) remind us boldly of the unremitting ways we regularly miss the mark and fall short of God's hope.

Of course, in the greater scheme of life, my remorse was trivial. More serious failures arise in all spheres of work and love - absent parenting, broken relationships, deceit, poor work performance, addictions, abuse, betrayal - and all the other ways we fall into what the church has called the seven deadly sins of pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed and sloth. Smaller failures, like our graduation mishap, hurt precisely because they represent far more than the actual incident itself. They remind us boldly of the unremitting ways we

regularly miss the mark and fall short of God's hope.

Fortunately, by the time I read the e-mail invitation, I had taken steps toward reconciliation, although the first lesson in self-forgiveness is that, like forgiving others, self-forgiveness comes slow. One cannot simply dump feelings of remorse and just "get over it." Twentieth-century psychology has soundly put to rest a long history of repression of emotions and affirmed their importance in self-awareness and understanding of others. Almost all therapeutic approaches, from Freud's "talking cure" to recent cognitive counseling, recommend honest and open acknowledgement of one's feelings as the first step to recovery, especially to someone outside the situation who nonetheless understands it intimately.

Psychology suggests two related steps: reassessment of distorted standards of self-perfection and self-affirmation. Lots of guilt is unwarranted - to use the technical terms of Freud, "neurotic" - or an unhealthy distortion of an overactive "superego," another name for the harsh internalized parental authority or demanding "heavenly Father." Christians overlook self-forgiveness because we also tend to reject self-love and foster ridiculous standards of perfection. It has taken psychologists, like Heinz Kohut, to demonstrate that people have healthy narcissistic needs for self-love that do not preclude or exclude love of others. Self-love and love of others are interdependent, something that the commandment to "love others as one loves oneself" actually implies. Given human limitation, failure is inevitable, and holding up absurd standards of perfection is neurotically unhealthy.

Almost all therapeutic approaches, from Freud's "talking cure" to recent cognitive counseling, recommend honest and open acknowledgement of one's feelings as the first step to recovery...

However, psychologists, like Robert Lifton, and theologians, like Paul Tillich, point out that not all guilt is neurotic. Some guilt is real, authentic and warranted. Evil abounds, and we do willingly choose paths of wrongdoing. Here Christianity's long tradition of practices supporting forgiveness takes up where psychology leaves off with additional steps: scripture reading, prayer and directly seeking self-forgiveness through formal and informal confession.

Communion puts reconciliation at the center of worship. This pivotal act distills as a rich exemplar the importance of the daily informal practice of going to the person wronged to admit mistake.

The Lord's Prayer itself puts self-forgiveness before God at its heart and links it with forgiveness of others. If we're going to forgive others, we need to forgive ourselves in prayer and before God. In Matthew 21, Jesus declares that "tax collectors and harlots," or those who, as Luther would say, "sin boldly" and then repent, will enter the kingdom before those who think they've got it all together. The Psalms are loaded with self-confessions. The psalmist rants and raves at God and all who will listen about the many transgressions, personal and otherwise, that surround him. Psalm 19, for example, celebrates the law but then immediately concludes: "Who can discern their errors? Clear me from hidden faults."

Long-standing practices of formal and informal rituals of confession and absolution also show a way forward. Communion puts reconciliation at the center of worship. This pivotal act distills as a rich exemplar the importance of the daily informal practice of going to the person wronged to admit mistake. In Jewish tradition, if you confess your sin once, twice,

three times, the other person is obliged to grant absolution.

So both psychology and Christianity suggest methods to deal with guilt and regret: acknowledge one's feelings, recognize the time-filled labor of reconciliation, talk with a friend, confess to the one wronged, read Scripture and meditate before God, re-evaluate bizarre expectations and, finally, let go.

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore is professor of pastoral theology and counseling at Vanderbilt University Divinity School and, most recently, author of Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective

This feature was developed by UMC.org, the official online ministry of The United Methodist Church.