

## **FORGIVENESS WORKS: ON BEING FROM A DIFFERENT PLANET**

A Response to Margaret A. Farley, “Mercy and Its Works: If Things Fall Apart, Can They be Put Right?”

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As someone who has followed Farley’s scholarly work in Christian ethics with great admiration, and closely followed her work with African women religious with even greater admiration, I am distinctly honored to respond to Sr. Margaret Farley’s plenary address. Farley’s vision, together with fellow Sr. Eileen Hogan’s, in founding the AACSS (All African Conference: Sister to Sister) and their work with the African women religious to develop strategies for responding to the pandemic of HIV/AIDS in Africa, is in itself a confirmation that the topic that she has addressed this morning is not for Farley merely academic. It is grounded in her own life’s journey as Christian, more specifically as a religious—a member of the Sisters of Mercy! She is, therefore, preeminently qualified to speak to us about mercy and its works.

Since I agree with the basic orientation of Farley’s talk, my brief remarks will seek to extend her reflection in a way that makes explicit the uniqueness, shape, and telos of the Christian forgiveness that Farley points to. “Can a year of mercy, a year of jubilee, really help us to put things right? Farley asks. It has a chance, she suggests, “if we do not avert our eyes from the suffering around us. . . , if we help one another learning together how at least some things might be ‘put right’; if we behold not only the pain and desperation in the world, but also the signs of divine mercy. It has a chance if the human works of mercy can weaken the works of war.” Among the traditional works of mercy Farley highlights forgiveness that is particularly needed and urgent to put things right in the 21st century.

I agree with Farley about the urgency of forgiveness in our time. I particularly find her insight on forgiveness and mercy as forms of wounded love extremely powerful. Moreover, her observation that forgiveness provides “some inkling of the kind of conversion, de-centering, required of ourselves if we are ever to offset the worst forms of fear, resentment, and self-righteousness that divides us” is exactly right. My only concern is that, even though Farley makes a powerful case for forgiveness, she does not display what Christian forgiveness concretely looks like. For I am worried that, unless Christian forgiveness is located within thick narratives and practices that confirm its character as a unique gift that offers an opportunity to “cross over to another shore” and thus “enter” into a completely different story, one that constantly interrupts our world with visions and possibilities that seem to come as if “from a different planet,” forgiveness easily becomes a panacea for all personal and societal problems.

This is what is partly reflected in the growing interest in forgiveness which spans diverse fields as political science, anthropology, biology, psychology and popular culture. Popular websites and programs encourage people to “try forgiveness” as an alternative to resentment and retaliation based on a valid realization that bitterness is

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<sup>1</sup>The expressions are drawn from Pope Francis’ “Homily, Mass with Priests, Religious and seminarians, Immaculate Conception Cathedral,” Bangui, Central African Republic (November 29, 2015).

like a cancerous acid that does more harm to those that hold it than to those to whom it is directed. Political scientists and social ethicists are also suggesting that forgiveness is good not only for the individual but for the society as a whole—the key to the healing of nations—and lasting peace.<sup>2</sup> The Fetzer Institute (Kalamazoo, MI) is a major funding organization whose mission is to investigate, activate, celebrate, and foster the “basic human sentiments” of love and forgiveness as a practical force for good in the world. Neuro-biologists are busy creating a neuro-map for forgiveness through experiments that use functional magnetic resonance imaging to map the physio-chemical process in the brain during a forgiveness moment. Psychologists counsel that forgiving is good for the body as well as the soul and that it can lower blood pressure and heart rate and reduce levels of depression, anxiety, and anger; people who forgive generally have more and better relationships with others, feel happier and more hopeful, and score higher on just about every measure of psychological well-being. Enterprising psychologists like Fred Luskin and his Stanford based Forgiveness Project even market forgiveness as a trainable skill, and through seminars and retreats offers techniques and steps (stages) of how to become a forgiving person.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas this recent interest helps to make forgiveness popular, it also makes the notion vague, and thus makes the task of Christian theology even more challenging in that it must constantly probe the distinctiveness of Christian forgiveness. What is unique about the Christian call to forgiveness? Is Christian forgiveness simply another mechanism to put things right? And does Christian forgiveness even promise to fix the world? Is forgiveness a good thing because it promises to make the world better or safer? I am not saying that Farley thinks so. I am saying that the point she makes about forgiveness and mercy as forms of “wounded love” needs to be made more explicit through narratives that illumine the nature, shape, and telos of this wounded love in the world. It is through such narratives that one might see more clearly that Christian forgiveness is not a mere “dropping of the heart,” not a mere “letting go,” but a journey at once painful and joyful that reflects the mercy of God, which as Farley suggests “empties itself, shares all burdens, and yearns ultimately for the healing of all creation.”

Let me tell one such story—or the broad outline of the story, which I have told elsewhere, which at least begins to get to the heart of some of these questions. From the story I will highlight five elements that point to the unique form and telos of the Christian journey of forgiveness. My overall intention in doing so is to make more explicit the personal, theological and ecclesiological dimensions of the call for forgiveness that Farley has drawn attention to.

In 1996 Angelina’s daughter was abducted by the rebels of the Lord’s Resistance Army in Northern Uganda.<sup>4</sup> Every Saturday, the parents of the abducted girls would

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Donald Schriver Jr. *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Dan Philpott in *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethics of Political Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford, University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Fred Luskin, *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness* (New York: HarperOne, 2003). Sample chapters of this popular book include “The Science of Forgiveness” (7); “Forgiveness techniques for healing” (9), and “The four stages of becoming a forgiving person” (14).

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011): 148–65.

meet to pray, fast, and advocate for the release of their daughters. As they concluded each meeting they would pray the Lord's Prayer. They were however, unable to get beyond the words "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us," for they were filled with anger and bitterness at their daughter's captivity. At one such meeting, feeling convicted by the Lord's Prayer, Angelina warned her fellow parents: "We are wasting our time. . . How can we pray for the release of our daughters if we have not learnt to forgive the rebels?" However, after some time, the parents were able to say the Lord's Prayer in full. "We felt," Angelina said, "some measure of peace. The Lord's forgiveness had come over us, and with that we felt we were able to somehow forgive even the rebels." The parents also felt the need to share the newly found gift of forgiveness with others in the community. For her part, Angelina went to meet the mother of the rebel commander who was keeping her daughter in the bush, and to extend forgiveness to her. The mother of the rebel commander could not believe that Angelina would do this.

While the newly found gift of forgiveness was enabling Angelina and the other parents to extend forgiveness even to the rebels, it also deepened their advocacy for the release of their children. They formed an organization, the Concerned Parents' Association, through which they advocated in the community, over the radio, and into the international community, appealing to the rebels and the government to end the war and release all the abducted children. As Angelina spoke against the atrocities of the rebels on one of the radio shows, the rebel commanders called in and wished to meet with her. They offered her a deal. They would release her daughter if she would shut up—if she would stop her advocacy which was drawing negative publicity to them. Angelina responded that she would do so only if they released all the abducted children, because, she told the rebels, "every child is my child." She went back home without her daughter to continue her advocacy on behalf of all children.

Needless to say, this was a very difficult decision because she knew the horror that her daughter was undergoing as a sex slave—a "wife" to a rebel commander. Angelina's family also could not understand how she had come to "sacrifice" her child! Angelina's response was "I could not do otherwise. . . The other children too had become my children." All she could do, she noted, was to intensify her advocacy, continue to pray for her daughter and the other children, and hope that God would one day allow for their release. Seven years into the abduction Angelina spent the night in prayer "arguing and wrestling" with God. In the morning, she got a telephone call with the news that her daughter had escaped. She returned home with two children that she had conceived in the bush, whom Angelina renamed "God's power" and "Miracle."

A story like Angelina's offers a number of lessons about the uniqueness and power of Christian forgiveness in the world. Five stand out.

First, that forgiveness is a gift. "A strange power had come over us and we felt some measure of peace." Only through an experience of forgiveness can one speak about a ministry of forgiveness. Only those who have truly experienced God's forgiveness can extend forgiveness to others. That Angelina and her fellow parents received the gift of forgiveness in the context of prayer, fasting, and saying the "Our Father" confirms the power of the spiritual disciplines to open the Christian up to the gift of God's forgiveness.

Secondly, that it is a journey. For Angelina the gift of forgiveness drew her into a long and painful journey. In the end, Angelina summarizes her journey of forgiveness

as "painfully sweet." The journey involved a willingness to sacrifice her daughter. This is what makes Angelina's forgiveness, and in fact, every genuine act of forgiveness, a parable of, and a participation into, God's own journey of mercy—into God's "wounded love."

Thirdly, if Angelina's story confirms that forgiveness is a gift and a journey, it also confirms that it is practical form of social engagement. It is a form of compassion, which, as Elizabeth Johnson reminds us, is a "blazing fierceness," an "empowering vigor," a movement of advocacy with and on behalf of the weak, the poor and voiceless. As compassionate advocacy, forgiveness resists and interrupts the structures (hard shells) of injustice, hatred and violence in the world, with the tenderness of God's wounded love.

Fourthly, one time when Angelina spoke about forgiveness to an elderly, blind woman whose only grandson had been abducted by the rebels, the elderly woman asked Angelina: "Are you from another planet?" Christian forgiveness is indeed from another planet; it reflects another logic—God's way of redeeming, recreating the world by "reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them" (2 Cor 5:19)—thus demonstrating his own love for us in that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). At a time when "forgiveness" has become so popularized and thus naturalized, the task of Christian theology is to point to and give an account of this totally odd, this out-of-this-world logic of forgiveness.

Finally, what Angelina's story shows is that the goal of this unique gift of forgiveness is the creation of a new society—a new community, that extends beyond blood, racial, or national ties—a community where "every child is my child." This is the revolutionary telos of Christian forgiveness, which seeks not simply to "put things right;" not simply to keep the old creation in place, but to radiate the possibilities of a new creation, a new society even in the midst of the old. For, while Angelina's journey of forgiveness may not have brought an end to the war in Northern Uganda nor even secured the release of her daughter and the other children, it was nevertheless able to radiate the possibility of a different order—of a different politics. In this case, Angelina's story is a form of ecclesial radiance, which points to the church as the sign and sacrament of God's mercy in the world. As radiance, it points to, and confirms that, in the midst of our broken and violent world, another world is possible. This is what makes the extraordinary Jubilee year of Mercy not just a powerful spiritual message, but a subversive political notion. It is an invitation to "step into" this other world and to rediscover, as Pope Francis reminds us, the essence of the gospel, namely that "Mercy is God's name," that "Mercy is the Lord's most powerful message."<sup>5</sup> The power of that simple message is that it summons the Christian into a revolution—a revolution of tenderness. Pope Francis notes in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis during his Sunday Mass homily at Santa Anna Church, March 17, 2013; also see *Vultus Misericordia, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* April 11, 2015.

incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.<sup>6</sup>

Without stories like that of Angelina it would be hard to know the true gift, the bitterly sweet experience of the revolution of tenderness into which we are summoned, and to which Margaret Farley has drawn our attention.

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 88.