

Why I Wrote What I Wrote **Margaret A. Farley**

In this short commentary on my essay (“Forgiveness: A Work of Mercy Newly Relevant in the 21st C”), I attempt to provide not a précis of the essay but a kind of exegesis and interpretation. I begin by reflecting on the central reasons for the particular focus I chose for the essay and on my concerns about its appropriateness. In light of these reasons and concerns, I hope to clarify what I was actually trying to do in the essay.

My principal motivation for writing as I did was my response to the social analysis essays previously submitted for this Conference. As I indicated in my own essay, these constituted for me a kind of “book of pain.” They were also a challenge—heightened by the historical, biblical, and theological analyses that followed and surrounded them—a challenge to identify a new and potentially powerful way of responding to the need for mercy in the world.

My decision ultimately to focus my essay on “forgiving all injuries” as a particular work of mercy was surely also motivated by my having grappled for some time with certain theoretical and experiential issues in feminist theology and ethics—issues not unlike many of those identified in the other Conference papers. We live in an era in which issues of gender, race, and class fuel worldwide struggles; and issues of religious imperialism and cultural domination undergird human conflicts of devastating proportion, whether between nations, business corporations, or tribes; whether within families, churches, or world religions. And everywhere our hearts and minds are bombarded with the consequences of these conflicts—consequences like poverty, sickness, and relentless dying.

Some time ago I became convinced (again, both theoretically and experientially) that these relational issues and their consequences could only be mitigated if human persons could

learn to “de-center” themselves sufficiently to offset their worst forms of fear, greed, indifference, envy, and above all, self-righteousness. Letting go of these would alone provide the “conditions of possibility” for *respect* for one another. This alone would make it possible both to behold the dignity and fundamental beauty in one another, as well as to recognize the genuine basic needs of each other. Respect and humility, respect and compassion: Here are the keys to remedying at least some of the problems of the world today. But of course, I could not propose these as a practical response to the task of this Conference; they are too abstract. I could not recommend them as a plan for the Sisters of Mercy in the 21st century, because by themselves they sound like, and might even be, pious wishful thinking rather than a practical objective or even an ideal.

As my pondering about how to focus my essay continued, however, I began thinking about the traditionally articulated “works of mercy” as a framework that might yield something more practical yet related to the fundamental need for, and requirement of, respect within every human relationship. The work of mercy that emerged in my exploration was, as the essay now shows, “to forgive all injuries.” I came to see it as the most radical of all the “works of mercy.” In a way that is unlike any other works, this particular work (especially if it includes the request to be-forgiven) demands actual “de-centering.” In a unique way it frees all those who “manage to do it” to *accept* one another. Moreover, whoever we are and whatever our circumstances, it is a work that we all must undertake at some time or another, and perhaps all the time. It is, at least from some perspectives, *the* work that Jesus sent forth his disciples to do.

The rest of the story you know. That is, you know how I tried to demonstrate in my essay the relevance and centrality of this work of mercy for our world today, and its particular

relevance and call, therefore, to the church and to the Sisters of Mercy. I began by proposing a new interpretation of the text, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (John 20:23).” In this interpretation, the text is not primarily about the authority of the church to judge sinners, but about the imperative given to the church to forgive, and thereby to free, sinners. It does not mean that evil must not be identified and condemned; it does mean that the face of the church presented to the world must be primarily not one that is “judgmental,” but one that is forgiving. It means, too, that the church must recognize its own need to be-forgiven.

To make this claim, however, it is necessary to understand what “happens” in the action and experience of both forgiving and being-forgiven. In my essay, therefore, I tried to describe the core of forgiving as “letting go” of something of one’s self, and “accepting” the one who has been the cause of harm; and I attempted also to describe being-forgiven as a “letting go” and an “acceptance” of offered forgiveness. I wanted to articulate something of what is necessary to heal conflictual relationships, whether we are engaged in Christian-Muslim dialogue, or in asking forgiveness for our part in the systemic conditions that cause poverty and oppression—even as we work to remedy them. I had, of course, to acknowledge the problems all of this raises if it is to be concretely practiced in relation to the world of conflict. I endeavored to show, through three stories, that forgiveness cannot be a key to the prevention or resolution of conflict, persecution, oppression, exploitation, unless it can be coupled with resistance—resistance to injustices of whatever sort. I proposed, in particular, the possibility of a form of commitment that I called “anticipatory,” a forgiveness that is real but that continues to resist wrongs even while it forgives.

As part of all of this, I wanted to show how the freedom that comes from forgiveness (and

from being-forgiven) makes possible a new way of “seeing” the other, and hence a new way of welcoming those who are different. It offers a paradigm for letting go of something in and of one’s self and thus becoming able to “see” the other in new ways—precisely in ways that elicit our respect for and acceptance of the other.

I ended my essay, as I end now, with my conclusion: If Sisters of Mercy can learn to embody this particular work in new ways at the heart of all the works of mercy—in all the troubled and troubling contexts of human distress and need, we will, I believe, be able to speak truth to power, stand in solidarity with those powerless and injured, challenge forces of evil whether in systems or ideologies, surrender our hearts in a plea for divine forgiveness for ourselves and for all whom we refuse to judge as our enemies. Insofar as this is today’s challenge and call to all the world, and within the church, surely it is our call in a particular way. The test of the appropriateness of my proposal will be in our trying it in every context in which the many works of mercy are needed.