

**COMMUNAL DIMENSIONS OF FORGIVENESS:
LEARNING FROM THE LIFE AND DEATH OF
MATTHEW SHEPARD**

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There are times when an event compels those of us who identify as pastoral theologians to reflect upon and to write about our perspectives. Such an event occurred 150 miles from where I teach, write, think and live. Yesterday morning on October 12, 1998 a young college student, 21 years of age, succumbed to the beating he received at the hands of two other young men. The apparent reason for the brutal attack was that Matthew Shepard's gay sexual orientation offended the young men. This tragedy not only affects Shepard's family and friends, but its impact is felt by all of us who value love and life more than hate and violence. The trauma reflects the dangers many experience—implicitly and explicitly—as we realize that there are those who would persecute us physically, verbally, spiritually, and emotionally, because of our love for human beings of the same gender.

Shepard's beating and death challenges my complicity and my reluctance to write prematurely about my research in the area of forgiveness. The silence of my careful thought has changed to an urgent pastoral theological response, even if it is only in its initial stages of conceptual maturity. It is impossible to remain intellectually aloof as I hear the grief of Shepard's family and friends, as I listen to the fear of my gay clients and students, or as I attend to the pain in my own soul. To abide in silence when I read hate material on the web, or to not respond when church leaders persecute lesbians and gays, their loved ones, and their families, is an abomination.

This article begins with the assumption that Shepard's death is a public trauma that invites communities of faith into an examination of forgiveness and its centrality in the Judeo-Christian tradition. For those who regard the loss of life as an injustice perpetrated not only against Shepard, but against all who support lesbians, gay men, bisexuals or transgendered persons, the questions become: What does forgiveness mean in response to such an injustice? What are the communal

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dimensions of forgiveness to which we must attend in order for forgiveness to occur?

My thesis is that forgiveness can only be realized when the community of faith struggles with, acknowledges its participation in, and ultimately changes its behavior in respect to the injustices experienced by lesbians, gays and their loved ones. Authentic forgiveness joins God's liberative activity as individuals and communities acknowledge and address the multiple layers of hurt and pain experienced as a result of an injustice, changing their actions in response. Forgiveness can not be relegated to intimate one-on-one relationships, but must be part of broader understandings of community. The shift in this article from individual forgiveness to communal accountability should not be seen as an effort to excuse or to dismiss the individuals who beat Shepard to death. Instead, I am arguing that individual accountability and forgiveness is not sufficient by itself. Without the community's regret, repentance and change, forgiveness remains incomplete for Shepard's family, or for any of us who harbor anger at the injustices that are embodied in his persecution.

In developing this proposal I will do three things. First, I will define forgiveness as a process that liberates individuals, families and communities from the bondage of hurt, pain and anger. Second, I will argue that the identification of communal levels of accountability is a necessary prelude to any ensuing actions of repentance or changes of behavior arising in response to public violence. Third, I will address how a communal pastoral theology of forgiveness can contribute to the liberation of persons and communities as we work toward justice in all relationships, not only in intimate and personal ones.

Throughout this examination of forgiveness, this article draws upon insights from the life and death of Matthew Shepard. In using his story to explore what it means to forgive, I do not wish to exploit Shepard's life and death. Instead, I seek to honor him by confronting a problem with which many of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered must deal. For many of us, the question of forgiving those who intend to harm us, of forgiving those who wish we were invisible and silent, or forgiving those who refuse to speak on our behalf are matters of deep integrity and faith.

The Concept of Forgiveness

Articles and books on forgiveness have become popular in these latter years of the twentieth century. As a culture we seek ways to

address the wounds and hurts of society, and as individuals we yearn for ways to forgive that will honestly release us from the traumas of the past. While I will not survey the breadth of this literature, it is important to note that this is a topic that has long captured the attention of theologians, pastoral caregivers, and psychotherapists. Few writers, however, focus on forgiveness as a communal activity, although there is a growing literature of persons who are concerned about the role of forgiveness in restorative justice. Highlighting three dimensions—relationality, process, and subversiveness—will assist in developing a working definition of forgiveness.

The invitation to forgive begins when a relational disruption causes intentional or unintentional pain, injury, trauma or injustice. The issue of intentionality is less important than the reality of the pain, the hurt, or the wound as experienced by the victim. After the initial event, someone (either the victim, friends or families of the victims, or sometimes the perpetrator of the hurt or injury) recognizes that something wrong has occurred in the context of a relationship.¹ The need for forgiveness arises only because we are connected with other individuals, with a family, or with a community and we feel the pain of a breach in our relationship. As a result, forgiveness must always be understood within the context of relationality.

Community, as will be suggested later in this article, is intrinsic to forgiveness. To focus only on individual forgiveness and to relegate the process of forgiveness to the personalized realm of individual relationships suggests that interactions between individuals affect only those individuals most intimately involved in an injustice or injury. One consequence of the multiple and interconnected webs of relationships in which we live is that individual incidents always have an impact on communities.

Forgiveness is best understood as a process that is multi-faceted and layered. It should not be understood as a single action; rather it is a process or a series of movements that unfold over time on individual and communal levels. It is fluid in nature, evolving in diverse ways and at various paces. On the one hand, forgiveness may happen rather spontaneously. On the other hand, it may be extremely slow in its movement, dependent on the relative depth of the hurt and the pain.

Included in the process of forgiveness are such things as: recognizing that a wrong has occurred in the context of a relationship; facing the hurt, anger and grief caused by the wrong; confronting those who caused or participated in the injury, thereby holding them accountable; repentance or a change in behavior on the part of the

perpetrators of the wrong; a releasing of the victims' energy, hurt and anger; movements toward reconciliation with self, God, others and community; and, sometimes a potential movement towards reconciliation with the ones who caused the harm. The latter movement (reconciliation) is dependent on those who initiated the injury recognizing the wrong, admitting to the injurious action, and changing behavior so as to create the potential for more just and loving relationships.

Moving through the forgiveness process eventuates in the power of a hurt or pain being placed in a perspective where it no longer overwhelms or directs life's energies. The goal of forgiveness is not reconciliation, nor is it the restoration of a relationship to the level it was prior to the infliction of injury. The goal of the process is to engage individuals and communities in the ongoing liberative activity of God by freeing self and others from immobilizing pain and hurt. Through the forgiveness process there is the potential for individual or communal reclaiming of the power displaced by the injustice or injury. Attending to the process of forgiveness implicitly leads to a greater sense of liberation for the victim of the hurt, and has the potential of liberating the perpetrator of the injury as well. Liberation of the former is always a by-product of forgiveness, while the latter is a sign of a more complete, mutual process of forgiveness. The mutuality of the process is dependent on a number of other factors, including the ability of the one causing the wounding to engage in acts of restitution and repentance. Ultimately, forgiveness is integral to the larger processes of God's liberative activity in the world as it encourages individuals and communities to move toward just ways of relating.

Rarely does the process transpire with ease when the wound is deep. Most often, the deeper the hurt or injury to the internal world, the longer and more complex the process becomes. For example, survivors of childhood sexual abuse frequently find the process of forgiveness to be a life-long and enduring process. With adult survivors this is true, in part, because the harm happened at such early and formative ages. As persons mature, they revisit the pain and hurt of a trauma or injury from new perspectives and understandings. Often, only from the cognitive, emotional and spiritual maturity of adulthood are survivors able to move through the slow process of being released from the overwhelming hurt, anger, or pain they experience throughout their lives.

Forgiveness does not mean returning immediately, or even eventually, to a prior level of trust or intimacy in a relationship. Indeed, often the integral dynamics of relationships are altered in ways that do

not allow for prior patterns to exist, especially if these dynamics were part of what led to or contributed to the injury or injustice. The process of forgiveness changes the very nature of the relationship and one cannot undo the injury caused in a relationship. However, if there is any mutuality in the work of forgiveness, a transformation of the relationship can result in stronger and more genuine ways of relating with others. Forgiveness is not about trying to fix a relationship; rather it is about honestly facing an injury and hurt that has occurred in the context of some kind of relationship and, in the process, finding ways to move toward justice and liberation.

The process of forgiveness is subversive because it overturns the dynamics of power. As one author notes, forgiveness is asymmetrical in that power is never equally balanced. The one who had the power to inflict hurt does not have the power to forgive. That power, instead, belongs to the one who was wounded. (Lundeen, 1989) Those who cause injury may ask for forgiveness, but the power to offer forgiveness rests with the victim. This maneuver needs to be understood as an invitation to justice and as part of God's liberative activity. The subversive shift in power can move persons and individuals toward revenge or toward justice.²

The difference between seeking revenge and justice in response to an injustice is determined by how energy and power are re-directed in response to hurt and anger. In revenge persons or communities re-claim power in ways that can easily turn abusive toward the one who initiated injury. As one ethicist suggests, genuine forgiveness "requires the abandonment of vengeance." (Shriver, 1995, 7) Power used to work toward just ways of relating, embodying mutuality and equity, represent more liberative approaches to forgiveness and are subversive by their very nature. They overturn the culturally normative ways of responding to injustice.

A working definition, then, of forgiveness is this: Forgiveness is a subversive and relational process summoned into action among persons, families, and communities when an injustice or hurt has been inflicted. It is a process that invites individuals and communities to move away from the overwhelming power of a hurt or pain while, at the same time, holding accountable those who have inflicted injustice or injury. Through this process individuals and communities are liberated from the bondage of oppressive anger and hurt, freeing their energies to work toward building, nurturing and sustaining relationships of justice and care.³

The death of Matthew Shepard invokes forgiveness on many levels. The beating and death appear to be the result of a “random” act of violence. Forgiveness at the most personal level will take time and work for the parents and friends of Shepard. How those closest to him will choose to move through that process will depend, in part, on those belief structures and systems that support them in their journey. And, in large part, their individual and personal journeys belong to them. Those of us who write from afar cannot surmise what they will need to go through or what resources they will bring to the process.

What is more immediate for those of us who are witnesses to this crime is the need to struggle with forgiveness in the context of the communities in which we live. Without our communal acknowledgment of the need for forgiveness, the process remains incomplete, or at best individualistic. Honesty in the context of community is essential for authentic and genuine forgiveness to occur at the broadest possible levels. As members of communities of faith and as participants in the broader culture in which this event occurred, we must not avoid facing the pain and hurt that many of us experienced in light of this incident. Undoubtedly, there are those who would give the work of forgiveness to the individuals closest to Shepard and leave the task of adjudicating justice to the legal system. However, as a pastoral theologian, I refuse to allow the legal system to substitute for the forgiveness work necessary in the communities of faith of which I am a part. It is for this reason, then, that I turn to look at the communal dimensions of the subversive and relational process called forgiveness, specifically those related to communities of faith.

Communal Wounding and Communal Accountability

As participants in various communities, we involve ourselves in relationships that open us to potential wounds or injuries. In the case of Shepard it is easy to understand the wounds of family members and close friends who grieve the loss of a son and a friend. At the same time, secondary and tertiary victims surround this event. This article focuses on the community of faith, more specifically the Judeo-Christian community, who is called to struggle with forgiveness. While there is no such thing as a monolithic community, for purposes of this article I want to suggest that the broadest understanding of community of faith (i.e., local congregations, denominations, world councils) can be understood as a collective with multivarious components. The entities are connected through a communal perspective.

Two questions demonstrate the complexity and the importance of the role of the community of faith in the process of forgiveness. First, how has the community of faith been wounded by the death of Matthew Shepard? A second related question is how does the community of faith participate in the wounding of Shepard or others and how should it be held accountable? Forgiveness is always a process of looking at both the need to forgive others and the need to be forgiven by others. The latter cannot be separated from the former.

Paying attention to communal accountability is important for two reasons. First, accountability precedes any repentance or change that is necessary if the community is to enhance and support more just ways of relating. Second, it is easy to overlook the multiple levels of accountability in our eagerness to get on with the individual re-establishment of some level of relatedness with others. Too often in our contemporary world we rush to notions of reconciliation without adequately addressing the levels of accountability, thereby never completely reaching forgiveness.

The community of faith has been wounded by Shepard's death. The subversive power to forgive can be highlighted by pointing to the numerous ways in which the community experiences hurt, anger, despair, or pain in response to his death. For example, while the family participated in a rather public funeral, protestors verbally persecuted Matthew Shepard, the lesbian and gay community, and faithful supporters. Not only is a particular local church affected by what transpired before, during and after the funeral, but many who claim the Christian faith feel the wound perpetrated publicly on lesbians, gays and their supporters.

As a result of Shepard's death, communities of faith face a renewed awareness about persecution. They must struggle concretely with the reality of bias, discrimination, injustice and death committed in the name of Christ. Some congregations are silent because of the depth of the feelings of pain and bewilderment; others speak out in anger; still others attempt to withdraw from the agony of their feelings. The community of faith is challenged, once again, to decide how to respond to diverse and divisive perspectives. The wounds are carried internally in local congregations and, in turn, in the life of the community as a whole.

At another level, this event has a detrimental impact on the lives of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered persons and their families. Many confront the realities, once again, that there are persons who would actively persecute them in the name of their faith. Real to many

of us are the fears and anxieties of experiencing vulnerability in new ways, continuing to wonder why the church insists on destroying and denying those in its midst, or why the church does not actively pursue justice on behalf of others. The wounds many of us experience at the hands of our sisters and brothers in the community of faith are deep and tragic, destroying the fabric of community.

Individual relationships are never about "individuals" alone; rather they are about the ways in which persons are connected through larger concentric circles of being. The Shepard event is a communal trauma and the victims, in this case, include many communities affected in secondary and tertiary ways by the violence. In order for forgiveness to be adequate in meeting the depth of the hurt and anger, there must be an honest accounting of the ways in which the community has participated, and even continues to perpetuate, some of the wounding. This leads, then, to the second communal dimension of forgiveness, namely that of accountability.

Accepting accountability is pivotal to the movement of forgiveness. Without recognizing who is responsible for particular aspects of an injustice it is difficult to assess who needs to repent, who needs to forgive and be forgiven, and for what. Likewise, without an accounting for the injustices that are experienced, individuals and communities are left to seek internal and individual ways to cope with the hurts and wounds. Communal accountability offers an opportunity to break out of the cycle of blaming others and to move toward repentance and change within the community of faith.

Those who wish to further the forgiveness process can do so by honestly claiming responsibility, however big or small, for the wounding that occurs to others. In the Shepard case, culpability is global in the sense that the responsibility rests with a culture that tolerates violence. While the world did not literally beat the life out of Shepard, we are all responsible for continuing to support cultures of hate where violence—whether to lesbians and gays or to persons of color or to women or to other groups—goes unchallenged. The collective community may not be responsible for the specific violent outburst of the two men who beat Shepard, but we are accountable for the seeds of complicity that we sow in our communities and the denial we carry that we have any power to change the world around us. Until we recognize our culpability and our power, our energy can not be released to work toward the eradication of violence.

Another level of accountability rests with faith groups that encourage hatred and fear of lesbians and gays, and with those of us who

tolerate such injustice. Many of us carry oppressive feelings of anger and hurt because we experience the community of faith as fertile ground for encouraging hatred and fear. We can acknowledge that honest and faithful Christians stand in very different places on the issue of homosexuality while not tolerating persecution and discrimination. The active and passive injury caused to the spiritual lives of lesbians, gay men and their families remains one of the most difficult things to forgive.

The movements toward communal forgiveness from lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered and others will not progress until a significant number of persons vocally and persuasively object to the use of God to spread fear and hate. Communal silence encourages injustice by its lack of vocal and prophetic censure. If we are to seek justice in the world and if we are to participate in the ongoing activity of God's justice-making in the world, we cannot stand silently by when we see injustices happen to others. Communities of faith are aware of hate crimes and of violence, yet we rarely hear about these injustices from the pulpit or from those who write books or teach classes. Communities that remain silent in the face of violence, yet who believe in just and loving ways of relating to others, need to seek forgiveness for their silence.

The process of forgiveness is central for those who are most hurt by the silence, particularly if we are to live full and liberative lives in the context of our faith. For lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered persons and their families and supporters, forgiveness becomes not just a task to undertake because we should, but something we participate in so that our lives are not controlled by anger, fear, and hate. Without accountability it is difficult for relationships to be re-structured or re-claimed; repentance presupposes acknowledgment of responsibility. The ability to confess, to recognize participation in the hurting, and to pledge to work toward justice and against heterosexist wounding on the part of the community of faith is essential for forgiveness.

Toward a Pastoral Theology of Forgiveness as Communal Process

The task and responsibility of pastoral theology is not only to be an intellectual voice, but to reflect with others on what it means to live out the beliefs of one's faith. Toward this end, then, the inquiry shifts into how an understanding of the communal dimensions of forgiveness can lead toward a fuller and richer understanding of theology and of the living out of that theology. A pastoral theological approach to

forgiveness promises to be significant as it moves forgiveness beyond an individual realm into a more complex communal vision.

In many ways, it is easy for persons to understand forgiveness and its importance in the struggle of individuals and families. We see around us the incredible pain and hurt that comes from injuries sustained in the context of our most personal and intimate relationships. To talk about forgiveness as liberation from overwhelming feelings of hurt, anger, and pain offers hope for our individual lives. In the Shepard case, for example, forgiveness might encourage the family and those who were close friends of Shepard to move from the devastation of their loss toward an embracing of life in new ways. This does not mean, of course, that they forget the pain or the trauma. It only suggests that eventually, through the process of forgiveness, there might be a reckoning with the wounds in ways that will enable them to continue to pursue life.

However, this individualized process of forgiveness takes account only of the realm of personal relationships. As noted above, a community has been affected deeply by the life and death of Matthew Shepard. For pastoral theology to do its job it must come to new understandings of the meaning of forgiveness as a communal process. Forgiveness, when fully realized, incorporates community in ways that can enhance and complement individual experiences. Again, to draw upon insights from the Shepard case, it is possible to see how the community's wrestling with accountability might have an impact not only on the Shepard family, but on others who feel wounded as a result of this event as well.

A communal process of forgiveness takes seriously our participation in the community of faith as we search our communal souls and acknowledge our participation in injustice by the very acts of our silence or the lack of our prophetic voice. The act of confession invites persons to consider new ways of being in relationships and to acknowledge that we are bound together by community. As participants in the community we can speak words of remorse and regret, we can continue to examine our biases and our own propensity to fear and hate, we can acknowledge our complicity and we can work to change the nature of our community. Ultimately, communal forgiveness would mean that we not only acknowledge our sin, but that we seek forgiveness from those whom we have intentionally, or unintentionally hurt by our beliefs.

An exploration into the communal dimensions of forgiveness invites persons actively to work to change not only the behavior of their

respective congregations, but the activities of others as well. In the case of heterosexism and homophobia, the community of faith must ask not only for forgiveness from those who are actively wounded, but must hold various constituencies accountable for the ways in which they continue to persecute others. Local congregations are bound together and must remain in conversation with each other. A pastoral theological frame moves forgiveness beyond a rather narcissistic understanding of heterosexism and invites us to engage with one another in a broader hope for justice.

One of the hopes of forgiveness is that individuals and communities can be freed to participate more fully in the ongoing activity of God's work through developing, fostering, and nurturing relationships that are based on justice, love and mutuality. Movements of the forgiveness process eventuate in freeing energies toward the development of just relationships. What would be freed for so many of us if communities not only embraced us but encouraged us in our love and care? Or, what would churches be freed to accomplish if they no longer spent their energy on keeping lesbians and gay out of their collective? Again, a pastoral theological understanding of the communal dimensions of forgiveness articulates how communities, as well as individuals, might be liberated to work toward just ways of relating.

Forgiveness liberates as it moves persons and communities toward more mature and healthy senses of self and others. According to theories of object relations, maturity eventuates in the ability to hold two opposing internalized objects together in moderation. In many ways, forgiveness encourages maturity as it requires of persons to recognize the humanity in others and to note the ways in which we are humanly present with each other. In writing about political forgiveness Shriver notes that forgiveness enables us to have "empathy for the enemy's humanity." (1995, 8) Hence, as a community we understand more clearly what it means for everyone to be children of God, capable of wounding and forgiving. Our relationships with one another are not built on the idealization of perfection but on the reality that imperfect people cause pain and injury and that forgiveness can bring restoration to relationships. We recognize that as individuals and as a community we have the capacity to seek forgiveness and to forgive.

Forgiveness requires the complete attention of our being. The process demands not only the focus of our will or emotion; it involves the tools of our senses, our emotions, our spiritual lives, our memories, and our bodies. To forgive allows us to bring the resources of our

beings into an ongoing participation in justice-making activities. Ultimately, forgiveness liberates the body of Christ on individual and communal levels, empowering us to seek ways of relating to one another that embody love, justice and mutuality. Pastoral theology can assist in formulating what it means to bring our complete being into the forgiveness process.

For those of us who self-identify as lesbians and gay men, and in particular for those who are gay males, the reality of physical violence lives within us. Even those who, like myself, feel relatively safe are confronted daily with the reality that there are many who persecute who would deny us a place and the right to live into our fullness. Some of us live with the daily hope that we can learn to pray for those who persecute us and to forgive communities who work against us, or who don't care enough to work on our behalf. As communities confess and accept responsibility for their actions and inactions, I am freed—along with sisters and brothers, parents and families—to find other places and other articles on which to spend my energy.

A genuine and authentic forgiveness suggests that others have recognized their participation in causing hurt and pain and that I am freed to forgive, not to be held hostage by my anger and hurt. For some of us engaging in forgiveness as a communal process means that we will be more willing to re-invest in systems, churches, and processes that have long been separated from us. Many of us, however, are not yet at the place of being willing to forgive those who are silent, those who actively persecute us, or those who turn their heads out of apathy or despair.

A pastoral theological contribution for those of us who continue to struggle with the very real feelings of hurt and anger invites us toward the potential of forgiveness. Forgiveness as a process that is subversive and relational, whose unfolding continues, must be understood as something more than what occurs between individuals. As we continue to examine the communal dimensions of forgiveness pastoral theology will make a contribution to the realm of our living.

Endnotes

1. The language of victim and perpetrator is complex and intricate. Some find such language too strong or problematic. Due to the limitations of space, an argument for this language cannot be developed in this article,

- yet it is important to acknowledge that the experience of the one who has been wounded is often talked about in the language of "victimization."
2. This subversive dynamic suggests something revealing about the nature of God's forgiveness. Perhaps it is not that God is all-powerful and all-forgiving, knowing no pain or hurt. Instead, we might understand that God's forgiveness arises from the feelings of powerlessness, hurt and injury experienced as a result of injustice. God is empowered to forgive as a result of the fact that others hold the power to cause the initial pain or injury. The power to forgive comes only as a result of the powerlessness experienced in being wounded.
 3. Developing the concept of relational justice as a normative way of living is beyond the scope of this paper. For understandings of just relationships see: Heyward (1989) and Marshall (1997).

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