

Pentecost 2020

As a lifelong Catholic, I think I'm probably in the majority when I think of Jesus's final words in today's gospel as a reference to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But over the years, I've discovered a much more personal, and much more challenging meaning: My life-long challenge of letting go of the ways in which people have hurt me, whether intentionally or unintentionally. When I "retain" the sins of others, or at least what I perceive as their sins against me, I load myself up with a burden that becomes harder and harder to carry as time goes by and also becomes harder and harder to let go of.

It's normal, I think, to see forgiveness as something I give to the other person for their benefit—for want of a better way of putting it. However, I've discovered that forgiveness is also a gift I give myself. As a religious sister who is also a psychologist once told me, "Forgiving means letting go of your last hope for a better yesterday." When I forgive, I let go of trying to change the past. It doesn't mean I forget what someone did, especially in the sense that I make myself more vulnerable to them doing it again. But I've found that when I can't forgive, or I refuse to forgive—I refuse to let go of the burden of unforgiveness I'm carrying—it's like drinking poison and waiting for the person I'm mad at to die.

As I thought about this, I was reminded of the famous Serenity Prayer:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
The courage to change the things I can;
And the wisdom to know the difference.

It may sound like a cliché, but I think many of us have realized through this COVID pandemic and its effects in our lives just how many things there are that we cannot change. In reality, the only part of this world and my life I truly can change is me.

Today, we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Spirit of Jesus is a gift to the church as a whole, but also a gift to each individual follower, each individual Christian. When we talk about the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, the first on list is usually the gift of Wisdom. Today, I ask God again for that gift of wisdom when it comes to forgiving others. And I also ask that each of us have the courage to stop retaining within ourselves the hurts that have been inflicted on us. Maybe then the peace that Jesus wishes for his disciples and for us may become more of a reality in each of our lives.

