

She hears the crash downstairs and startles awake, her adrenaline surging. Moments later, the sound of cursing rises to her ears and her fear turns to annoyance. Tossing on a robe, she heads downstairs and views the scene she has witnessed many times before. There he is, sprawled across the couch, snoring noisily, the smell of beer emanating from his very pores, clearly as drunk as he can be. The table lamp lies on the floor, a new dent in the shade, and as she resignedly picks up the lamp, her son suddenly awakes and turns to her. “I’m so sorry,” he mumbles dejectedly, “please forgive me.” Remembering the gospel reading from this Sunday, she can’t help but wonder, “Has it been seventy-seven times yet?”

Forgiveness.

A man grew up in the late 50’s and early 60’s, one of thousands of kids who attended Catholic grammar schools. When he was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, one of the nuns began to target him for special attention. He apparently could do nothing right, and his resentment grew. When the school year ended, he made a simple vow. I will never step foot in a Catholic Church for the rest of my life. It’s been fifty years now, and his vow has held, one that he is proud to share with anyone when the subject of religion arises. You see, it’s that nun’s fault.

Forgiveness.

On January 21, 1995, Tariq Khamisa, age 20, while delivering pizza in San Diego, CA, was shot and killed by a 14-year-old boy, Tony Hicks. Tony had taken this order to shoot Tariq from an 18-year-old gang member. Tariq’s father, Azim Khamisa, was devastated. It took all his willpower to simply climb out of bed in the morning. His only son was dead.

Forgiveness?

There are many misconceptions about forgiveness. Most of us think that forgiveness has mostly to do with the other party, the one we are either forgiving or asking forgiveness from. This is not accurate. Forgiveness is first and foremost an act of will on our part, an act that has two components to it. The first component is obvious and simple – it is an acknowledgement that a relationship has been broken, that a fracture needs to be mended. Your *desire* to forgive or be forgiven is this essential first element. There is a second component, however, which is much more difficult and thus, far

more important. There must be an act of restorative justice sought and explicitly followed. Both of these elements can occur with or without the other party's involvement. Seem impossible? Let's look more closely at each story told, each *true* story, by the way.

Our first example features a mother with an alcoholic son. She has the first component down – her desire to forgive. What parent doesn't want to give their child every benefit of the doubt, every possible avenue to a better life? Her son equally wants to be forgiven, and humbly asks for the favor. But what's wrong here? You who have been down this path know it well – the mother is enabling her son to remain in this horrible lifestyle. This is a classic codependent relationship. What's missing is the second component – restorative justice. The mother must draw firm boundaries, the son must admit his addiction and get treatment. Typically in these relationships, the non-addict, the one being taken advantage of, must act first. I don't have time in this homily to go into details on how to make this happen, but here's a simple hint. If you see yourself in this example, get yourself to an Al-Anon meeting as soon as you can. They'll show you how to break this chain of pain.

In our second example, the man with the Church grudge, we seem to have an intractable situation. The nun has been dead for 20 years, the man does not seem to want any reconciliation. We're lacking both components of forgiveness, desire and reconstructive action. What to do? Note carefully – the very fact that the man raises this issue every time Church comes up in conversation is very telling. This is a deep-seated, festering pain. Perhaps you're married to this man. Perhaps he's your uncle or father. What can you do? First and foremost, acknowledge the pain – let him tell the story. Ask him what would he need to feel better about this? Would he like to talk to a priest, to a deacon? Believe me, we've heard the stories before. Is he willing to act in good faith? Does he want this pain to ease away? Does he feel far from God? It may not work, but it's worth a try. Plant the seed first. See how God works with him. You may be surprised!

The third example seems the most horrible of all. A father has lost his son to a senseless murder perpetrated by a 14 year-old boy. The father, Azim, is a Sufi Muslim, a man of faith. It is the practice of his faith to limit your mourning to 40 days, after which you are encouraged to channel your grief into compassionate deeds. He decided to reach out to the family of the boy who killed his son. He had been led to the realization that the tragedy was

about “victims at both ends of the gun,” one being his son and the other a 14-year-old gang member who was likewise a victim of society.

Azim forgave the family of Tony Hicks and formed a friendship with Tony’s grandfather and guardian, Ples Felix. In October 1995, Azim founded The Tariq Khamisa Foundation (TKF), in honor of his son, to “stop kids from killing kids,” and Ples joined him in his dedication to end youth violence. They began to give talks to schools, teaching elementary, middle, and high school students about the realities of gangs, violence, revenge, and the importance of making the right choices in life.

The foundation’s entire curriculum is based on six key messages:

1. Violence is real and hurts us all.
2. Your actions have consequences.
3. You can make good and non violent choices.
4. You can work towards forgiveness as opposed to seeking revenge.
5. Everyone, including you, deserves to be loved and treated well.
6. From conflict, love and unity are possible.

Don’t let anyone tell you that forgiveness is easy. It never is. Peter asks Jesus the very reasonable question, “...how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter is being quite generous here, isn’t he? Most of us would quit the charade of forgiveness after three times, let alone six or seven. But Jesus is quick to reply, and as usual, throws Peter and by extension us, for a loop. Not seven, but seventy-seven. How is this possible? As long as you have the willingness to forgive, and seek to reconstruct what is broken, forgiveness moves from pain to possibility. And that is exactly how God works with us, isn’t it? Jesus consistently tells sinners, “Your sins are forgiven!” But he doesn’t stop there. “Go and sin no more.” In other words, break the negative chain and get back on the right road. God is so optimistic about us that he offers this chance over and over and over. Look into your heart and know that it is true. God has forgiven you seventy-seven times and counting.

Tony Hicks, the 14-year old murderer of Tariq Khamisa, is in prison today. He is eligible for parole in 2027, 10 years from now. Tony will be 47 years old when he is released. Unlike many ex-convicts, Tony has an opportunity when he gets out. Azim has offered him a job at the Tariq Khamisa Foundation. Forgiveness.