

A close-up photograph of vibrant green leaves, likely from a plant like a peace lily, with water droplets on a spiderweb in the upper left corner. The text "THE FORGIVENESS LAB" is centered in white, bold, uppercase letters.

THE FORGIVENESS LAB



Welcome to The Forgiveness Lab

Our **workshops and resources** are designed for leaders in ministry and their communities of faith. We trust that these experiences will impact your theology, invigorate your practice, nourish your devotional life, encourage your relationships, and tend your woundedness. Our discipline is to look at everything through the lens of forgiveness.

Forgiveness begins in God's radical grace and is the way God's love gives ultimate definition to our lives. It releases **creative power for life-giving change** that is greatest when situations seem most hopeless, and transforms our experiences not only of the divine but also of one another and of ourselves.

It is helpful to think of the practice of forgiveness as a range of imagination. Forgiveness, in all of its forms, **breaks cycles** of violence and diminishment, recognizing the image of God in all people. It **opens futures** that have been closed, **applies healing** to wounds that we have continued to carry from the past, and engages us with dynamic possibility in the present.

The receiving of forgiveness and its practice in our lives have powerful implications for pastoral ministry, congregational care, individual and communal well-being, and mission outreach.

Forgiveness is the Deep Expression of Who God Is

Forgiveness is the power of God at work in our lives: removing obstacles that have limited love and well-being; lifting burdens that have crushed our spirits and distorted our full humanity; tending carefully wounds of the soul; releasing us from constraints that have stifled reconciliation and the practice of community; **liberating us to see and experience** ourselves, and those around us, through the eyes and heart of God.

Forgiveness is not just something God does; it is the deep expression of who God is, in every part of our lives. **Everything about our lives**—our origins, our histories, our relationships, our joys and sorrows, successes and failures, completions or lack thereof—all of it is lived in the “give-ness of God!” God’s action for us is unilateral, it is ever-creative, it is “from the beginning.” **Think of it as “fore-giveness.”** God’s grace is not and cannot be conditioned by our actions. That realization is profound. Its truth changes everything.

Let’s explore what that can mean for you, your life, your theology, and for the ministry of your faith community.

Forgiveness Shapes the Very Heart of Jesus’ Ministry

Throughout his ministry, Jesus recognizes people, honors people, includes people, unburdens people, and frees them from all sorts of bondage. He remembers their stories in ways that **redefine each person’s sense of identity and purpose**. He touches the untouchable, unparalyzes the paralyzed, gives gifts and receives them, learning even as he teaches, all the while confronting injustice with love and death with life.

Jesus’ forgiving life is manifested in his ability to enter deeply into the experiences of others and, remarkably, to offer hospitality and create sanctuary for people no matter where he is, even in hostile territory! He offers a spaciousness and availability to everyone and to the various contexts where he meets them.

As we read the gospels we note that Jesus does not define himself in terms of a particular geographical place or social group. Radically free in the love of God, **he is able to be “at home” with everyone**. The new community he is building extends the meaning of family in much broader and interconnective terms. In his preaching and teaching, Jesus powerfully references the Hebrew Scriptures while unlocking the salvific power of the text, **transcending the letter of the law** and embody a fresh, living, healing Word.

In The Forgiveness Lab we will explore with you how the above description of Jesus’ ministry can become the description of your church’s ministry, and of your pastoral vocation!





Forgiveness Shapes Our Lives

Let's get personal. What are your experiences of being forgiven? Try to answer the following questions, as honestly and specifically as possible:

- When have you been loved in the face of your own painful and destructive behavior?
- When has someone interfered in a damaging cycle that has been swallowing you up, in order to make room for an alternative future?
- When has someone taken the risk and invested the patience to speak to you honestly about hurt you are causing, while not forsaking their relationship with you?
- Who has acted for your well-being when you have not been acting for theirs?
- When have you been given a second chance, or a third?

If any of these blessings are familiar to you, then you know something about “being forgiven.”

But let's not explore forgiveness only in the context of injury:

- When have you been gifted by someone else, quite apart from any “deserving?”
- Who has seen the “image of God in you” that you can't see in yourself?
- Who has loved you only as they themselves would wish to be loved?
- Who knows you deeply and accepts you wholly?

Exploring the answers to any of these questions takes us into the territory of blessed possibility.

We can reflect on how these factors have affected our life's course, even in humble ways, and empowered us to new actions.

Forgiveness begins with God. In my workshops, when I ask people about their experience of being forgiven by God, the most common responses are Bible quotes or appeals to doctrine. God's forgiveness is more of a concept than an enlivening breath. So I seek to reframe our consideration: **“In what ways do you live as a forgiven person?”** It makes for a great deal of exciting and unusual discovery.

If you are a pastor, these questions can help you uncover stories of forgiveness among your people, stories that people can claim as essential to their own narratives and the **common narrative of your faith community**. This is also rich territory for congregations to explore in small groups and workshops.

In the Forgiveness Lab, we can help you with that!





Forgiveness is the Spirit of God Active in the World

On Easter evening, the risen Jesus comes to his disciples, who are still locked away in a prison of shame, regret, and fear (John 20:19-31). Though he is alive again in the world, they find themselves still bound, unable to join him in his freshly liberated love. Jesus comes to them, penetrating their “locked doors,” drawing close, and affirming his deep relationship with each one: “Peace be with you.” Even in their frail state, he commissions them to join him in a new chapter of the salvation story: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” He invites them to venture boldly into the territory of forgiveness. Jesus breathes on them, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” as he blesses them with an incredible revelation: **The Holy Spirit, the breath of Jesus’ life, is the Spirit of forgiveness!** In breathing the Spirit upon them, he inspires them with fresh wisdom: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” In other words, **withholding forgiveness, or refusing to receive it, is like “not breathing!”** Conversely, forgiving is infusing another with the power for new life, while claiming it for yourself.

The scene from John’s gospel references the creation story in Genesis where the original human is not really alive until filled with God’s own breath. God’s forgiveness, the breath that animates Jesus, is the power that makes us alive as human beings. The practice of forgiveness will be at the heart of our humanness, each and every day.

In this poignant encounter, Jesus bares his wounds to his followers. Subsequently, he will invite Thomas to touch them with his own hands. The forgiveness made real in Jesus **does not deny the wounds of life** and how they have been incurred, but acknowledges their truth, touching them and tending to them while opening honest paths to futures that will not be prisoners to the past.

In The Forgiveness Lab, we believe that **God’s untempered love is the liberating force** that encourages honest confession and enables us to shed the chains that can actually hamper our repentance. God’s forgiveness makes confession and repentance possible, not the other way around. Let’s breathe deeply, together!





Preaching and Teaching Forgiveness

The preaching and teaching of forgiveness can be thrilling, life-giving territory. The Forgiveness Lab Preaching Model offers fresh encounters with the text, paying particular attention to how and where we can meet the biblical stories with the stories of our own lives. We discern where the power of God's forgiveness is already working its way with us, and where the Spirit of forgiveness is moving in life of our community.

In the midst of careful sermon preparation, here are some guiding questions to plumb the depths of the scriptural text and the “text” of your community:

- Where do you perceive God's “giving” and the Spirit's movement?
- Who is being liberated?
- What burdens are being lifted, enabling God's people to rise to their full stature?
- What obstacles are being removed, or better yet, transformed?
- In what ways are God's people being unbound to love more fully? What will that look like in their world and in ours?
- What are the dimensions of healing and empowerment being manifested in you as you prepare the message?

The terminology for forgiveness throughout the New Testament is rich and deep in meaning: to set free; to let go; to be released; to yield; to remit; to pardon sin or a monetary debt; to acquit; to give graciously, freely. The study of forgiveness, in the incarnational way, is to explore these meanings in our daily lives: our loves, our challenges, our fractures, our burdens, our journeys, the substance of our relationships. Each becomes the territory of revelation.

These links might stoke your imagination:

- A Good Friday Sermon: www.forgivenesslab.com/2018/03/30/where-all-of-us-belongs/
An essay that could resource sermon preparation: <http://forgivenesslab.com/2012/02/17/unparalyzed/>

Join us for a Forgiveness Preaching Lab! Bring all that you have, and all of yourself. Nothing is wasted.



Living into God's Forgiveness: Congregational Journeys to Spiritual Renewal and Leadership Empowerment

There is a vivid, compelling story of forgiveness in the thirteenth chapter of Luke's gospel. Jesus is teaching in a synagogue on the sabbath day. A woman is present who has had "a spirit of weakness" for eighteen long years; she is "bent double and quite unable to stand up straight." Jesus sees her, inviting us by example to see her, too.

Imagine the scene: Jesus is teaching at the center of the worship space, surrounded by people occupying their familiar places. With the teacher sitting, the woman may have been completely obscured from normal sightlines. In engaging the story, it is well worth us **joining with her, bending ourselves double** and looking at the world from her vantage point while noting the discomfort in our own bodies.

Jesus calls the woman to him, the crowd needing to part like the Red Sea as she joins him at the center of the action. What he says to her is quite startling: "Woman, you are set free from your weakness." **Not cured, or healed; set free.** The verb employed in the story, *apoluo* (to loose, release), is a key forgiveness term in the New Testament. Jesus lays hands upon her, and immediately she is able to stand up straight, praising God! She is able to look someone else in the eye for the first time in nearly two decades!

But there is a complaint. The "ruler of the synagogue" protests that Jesus' action is disruptive, that he should not be healing on the sabbath, that the woman can come on another day. After all, **she's been like this for eighteen years.** What's one more day? Jesus challenges the leader and those who think likewise to look in a mirror and consider what is binding their hearts. He declares the woman a child of God's promise. Why shouldn't she be **loosed from bondage on the sabbath day?** At the conclusion of the story, all of the people—including, presumably, the leader—are rejoicing and praising God. All are unbound. The forgiveness in the scene is changing life for everyone.

Stories like this are deeply relevant and encouraging to congregations as we live into God's forgiveness together. We can grow to be communities of forgiveness; that is, communities of nurture, trust, reconciliation, healing, and mission.

In The Forgiveness Lab, this is careful work; good work. We acknowledge and celebrate God's gifts. We embrace God's call anew. We develop capacities for deep listening as well as **honest and compassionate speech.** We learn how spiritual disciplines enhance the common life of a people. We tend to wounds. We identify what spiritual forces and attitudes have been crushing us and distorting our common life, acting to interfere in destructive patterns while developing **fresh, life-giving alternatives.** We receive forgiveness, and are empowered to extend it. Leaders are lifted up, people experience healing, the community is inspired for new expressions of the ministry of Jesus Christ. How does that sound?



Attributions

This content is richly informed by the work of Richard Rohr, including:
Everything Belongs. New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1999;
Near Occasions of Grace. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993.

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“Zen-Mind, Christian-Mind, Empty-Mind,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 19:1, Winter 1982.

