



There were no ripe tomatoes that year. Worse than groundhogs or squirrels, 6 year old next door neighbor Esther had delightedly picked the vines clean, reaping dozens of small, hard, green tomatoes. Esther's mother had already called over to our house to share the news and alert my mother that Esther was on the way. "Esther has something to say to you."

My mother answered the door to find Esther clutching a basket overflowing with the unripened tomatoes. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice wavering, blinking away tears. "I picked all of your tomatoes." My mother looked at her tomatoes, a labor of love from the garden. She looked forward to them every year. And she looked at the face of this young girl, crestfallen and disappointed. I remember the loving tone my mother took in her words. "Thank you for telling me, Esther. You didn't know that you were doing something wrong. I know you won't do it again. You learned something today. I appreciate your apology and I forgive you. We will still enjoy these tomatoes."

The little girl smiled and thanked my mother. Esther had just learned a powerful lesson about forgiveness.

Perhaps you have a memory like this from your childhood. Can you remember what you did to warrant an apology, how were you received, and how did you feel afterwards? Did you feel ashamed or accepted? Did you feel punished for coming forward to admit and address your wrong doing, or encouraged to come forward again? And what actions did the adult encourage you to take as a result?

These small apologies in our childhoods are a blueprint for forgiveness in our adult lives. Although we are hardwired for forgiveness, it isn't something we always intuitively understand. We have to be taught by adults who believe forgiveness is possible to turn into adults who believe forgiveness is possible. We have to be taught that we can be human, make mistakes and still be loved and a valued part of a family, community and society, even as we are held accountable for our mistakes.

The older we get, the harder it can get to apologize, even as we yearn for the "feeling" of forgiveness. Our mistakes get bigger and harder to admit. Grievances can pile up upon grievances turning into grudges and resentments, till the origin of harm is obscured. Our stories get twisted up in our memory and the facts become blurry. Our egos protect and defend against our vulnerability. And individual mistakes get embedded into organizations, institutions, systems, not so easily addressed with a single "I'm sorry."

In our culture, we don't see a lot of public modeling of accountability and forgiveness. In fact, it's more common to see denial, blame and defensiveness writ large, or superficial apologies without true accountability.

Think back to the Wells Fargo hearings in late September. Who can forget the testimony of John Stumpf, chairman and CEO of the Wells Fargo & Company appearing before the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee? "I am deeply sorry that we failed to fulfill our responsibility to our customers, to our team members, and to the American public," he said in prepared remarks. "I want to apologize for violating the trust our customers have invested in Wells Fargo. And I want to apologize for not doing more sooner to address the causes of this unacceptable activity."

In a highly publicized response, Senator Elizabeth Warren questioned the actions Stumpf had taken as a result of his apology. "You haven't resigned, you haven't returned a single nickel of personal earnings, haven't fired a single senior executive." Warren was modeling the need for a public conversation not just about blame but about accountability. I have found this definition of blame and accountability to be helpful, from organizational systems expert Marilyn Paul.

The dictionary helps clarify the differences between accountability and blame. To be accountable is "to be counted on or reckoned on." To blame is "to find fault with, to censure, revile, reproach." Accountability emphasizes keeping agreements; blaming is an emotional process that discredits the blamed.

Accountability creates conditions for ongoing, constructive conversations in which our awareness of current reality is sharpened and in which we work to seek root causes, understand the system better, and identify new actions and agreements. The qualities of accountability are respect, trust, inquiry, moderation, curiosity, and mutuality.

Blaming, on the other hand, is more than just a process of allocating fault. Blaming provides an early and artificial solution to a complex problem. It provides a simplistic view of a complex reality: know what the problem is, and you're it. Blame thus makes inquiry difficult and reduces the chances of getting to the real root of a problem. Blame also generates fear and destroys trust. The qualities of blame are judgment, anger, fear, punishment, and self-righteousness.

Public conversations about blame and accountability have the potential for profound implications, not just on our national level but across the global level. Just as

accountability can be taught, so can these concepts be passed on or withheld from generation to generation. We see this in deeply entrenched conflict zones around the globe – conflicts between close neighbors of different tribes and castes, ethnic groups and religious sects. Israelis and Palestinians. Alawite and Sunni Syrians. Hindu Nationalists and Muslims in India.

Think about Columbia's "no" vote last Sunday. The nation, at war for forty years, could have voted to end the globe's longest continuous guerilla war with the full support of the government. Over 220,000 people have been killed and over six million displaced by the conflict, which started as a small uprising. A landmark peace agreement had been reached in August between the President Juan Miguel Santos and FARC commander Timochenko Echeverri. Progress had been made on the part of the FARC to turn in their weapons and begin the process of restitution with the families and communities directly affected. According to the Washington Post, "For the first time, rebel commanders met with the families of victims at the sites of notorious FARC massacres, [seeking forgiveness](#)." If the referendum had passed, the 7000 rebels and thousands of militia members would have moved into UN monitored camps to begin disarmament. They would have had the chance to avoid imprisonment by confessing their war crimes and making reparations to victims. It would have also paved the way for FARC to enter electoral politics. Here was a large-scale pathway for a nation to embrace a process of accountability for a horrific past. But the narrow defeat revealed a country divided, still suffering from the fifty years of violence, not yet ready for accountability or the forgiveness that could follow.

One no vote, from Jakelin Rueda, came from experience. Her father, a farmer and community leader, was killed by the FARC in 2002. She felt the yes votes were coming from optimistic city dwellers who were never touched by the pain of the FARC's terror and couldn't see the full damage, nor how much work and time would be needed to make the past wrongs right.

"We all want peace, and I respect those who vote yes, but I can't support this agreement. There's no real justice in it."

On the other side was Rocío Cano, 41, a schoolteacher. "I voted yes for the future of my children, so they won't have to live in a country at war. Fifty years of violence is enough."

What hope does the future have for peace, without a process of accountability for the past and forgiveness for the present?

Some would say that only those who see the optimism of new generations can truly create the possibility of change. Many of us are perhaps more familiar with "the Troubles" of Northern Ireland, the guerilla war that pit Catholic Irish Nationalists

against Protestant loyalists began in the late 60s, just a few years after the beginning of FARC. In North Belfast in 2002, more than 35 years into the conflict, the persistent unrest was creating an unsafe learning environment for the local schools. Rioting and arson caused school shut downs on a number of occasions. Bullying and aggression from the mixed Catholic and Protestant neighborhood showed up on the playground. For one mostly Protestant school, administrators, teachers and parents all agreed that they needed help. Outreach came in the form of a new first grade curriculum, written by Robert and Jeanette Enright, pioneering a new academic project called the "International Forgiveness Institute." The Enrights were seeking an ongoing high conflict zone to pioneer this project.

Parents initially resisted. They were not ready to forgive the other side, nor to begin to bridge their political differences. But the Enrights persisted, calming the fears of the parents—they would start small, not manipulating children to forgive the past, but teaching them the practice of empathy to navigate the little conflicts that can quickly be inflamed into violence. At this early age, the children learn the basic concepts that each person has inherent worth, even if their actions have been hurtful, and is deserving of a chance to forgive and be forgiven.

One of their activities to build empathy is simple: the teacher hands them a pair of colorful plastic sunglasses: forgiveness glasses. When the children put them on, they are asked to see the person who hurt them with new eyes, learning empathy for the experience of the other person. They are asked: how does that person feel? How is that person hurting too?

As this curriculum took off, the neighboring Catholic school adapted it as well and the schools expanded forgiveness education into all of their elementary grades. By learning new skills which help them to see the inherent worth of others and honestly confront their grievances and hurts, large and small there is a hope that perhaps their future will look different than their parents'. Curriculum writer Robert Enright hopes that this hopeful example can help spark a public and global conversation that centralizes forgiveness as an essential practice to building a more just and accountable society. Enright believes it is the educators, the peacemakers and the religious communities who have the best chance at teaching accountability to build a forgiveness filled future.

I wonder what it might look like to have our congregation to join this effort for peace and become a laboratory for forgiveness? After all, we aren't a corporation dedicated to the bottom line, or a political sect vying for an agenda. We are in the business of building values-centered relationships that are loving as well as just. We come to church to be better people, but we don't always know how to get there alone. More important than believing in the same God, we believe that we can support one another in

modeling a shared vision of mutuality, the highest form of community. In Judaism, this is God's shalom, God's peace—God's wish for rightness in the physical well-being of people, in the mutuality of relationship, and the moral or ethical accountability called justice.

How might we begin to think about this congregation as our laboratory for forgiveness, a place where we come to seek the deeper "shalom" we aspire to in our own lives and on our planet? It might begin by starting small. Remember the "forgiveness glasses" exercise used in Northern Ireland to teach children about empathy and inherent worth. The exercise was used to address the playground violence, which mirrored the violence marring the community. We all have big entrenched conflicts in our lives, difficult situations that won't simply be resolved by saying "I'm sorry." We all live with the reality of violence which creeps its way into our imaginations. Could we think of this congregation as our playground, where we practice modeling the smaller acts of mercy and kindness that can help us build the confidence to tackle the more challenging conflicts of our lives? It's a place to start, and you have a chance to try it out today, and if you can't try it out today, can you hold the intention to try it in the future? Forgiveness is always waiting for us when we are ready.

In a twist of fate, on Friday Colombia's president was awarded the Nobel Peace prize for the landmark FARC agreement. The future is yet unknown, but the seeds for a different future have been sewn. May we hope for the same, for ourselves and our families, for our nation, and for our world.

Blessed be, and Amen