



## THE CIRCLE OF FORGIVENESS

Sue Hanisch is a British woman who, nearly 20 years ago, was in London, in a subway station, when a terrorist's bomb exploded. Sue lost her right leg and suffered other severe, permanent injuries. All these years later, after seemingly endless rounds of physical therapy and years of counseling, she is able to reflect on the importance of forgiveness to her personal healing. She has forgiven those who hurt her: "The choice to forgive is counter-intuitive and counter-instinctive, but when it happens it is a moment of true transformation and grace. A miracle has taken place before our eyes and in our hearts."

Today's Gospel is ultimately about forgiveness. It's a well-known story that points up all sorts of unfairness in the society of Jesus' day: the stoning of a woman caught in adultery, the double standard between men and women, the death penalty itself. An oft-asked question that people have pondered for centuries is, Why does Jesus write in the sand? It's a powerful image. We don't know if he wrote anything, or if he was simply doodling, spending time as the men pondered their own state of sinfulness. Whether Jesus' marks were writing or not, one by one, the men leave, and in the end, Jesus, Son of God, will not condemn the woman, either.

**The whole thing was a trap.** In today's Gospel, what we first hear is a story of Jesus being tested by his opponents. The Mosaic law prescribes death for the woman caught in adultery. But the law of the Roman occupiers forbids the Jews to enforce capital punishment. The men poised to kill the woman ask Jesus to give a "no-win" opinion. If he agrees with them, the woman will be stoned to death, and, not only will the woman die, but there will be trouble with the often-harsh Romans. If he advises letting her go, he will be violating his own Jewish, Mosaic law. Jesus gives no opinion, but challenges the crowd to look within their own hearts for sin! Jesus offers for us a model of conflict resolution. Rather than jump into the fray on one side or the other, *Jesus* finds middle ground. He ultimately sides on behalf of justice, without hurting anyone.

**Forgiveness has been called the "heart of the Gospel"** 'But the story has a deeper meaning. If you and I can forgive other people, we are fulfilling the commandment of God to love one another. That's why the crucifixion is often talked about in terms of the forgiveness of sins. By that forgiveness, even while being executed, Jesus shows the depths of his love for all of us. When we choose love rather than nursing old grudges, when we seek to forgive rather than wait for someone else to make the first move, we are living the Gospel. Consider the Prayer of St. Francis: "It is in pardoning that we are pardoned." One could almost think of it as a "circle of forgiveness."

**We are forgiven.** The real challenge of today's Gospel is the question, How do you and I forgive? Sue Hanisch testifies to the power of forgiveness. She opened her heart to God's Spirit. The journalist Terry Anderson was a captive of terrorists in the Middle East. After many, many months of isolation and poor treatment, his captivity ended. When he arrived back home to the United States, he said, "I forgive my captors." He was in touch with his faith after his ordeal. "But forgiving does not mean forgetting," he added. He pleaded that his captors be brought to justice. Our families are the arena where most of us are called to learn and practice forgiveness.

**Leave judgment to God.** "Let the one without sin be the first to throw a stone." In other words, leave the judgment to God. As Jesus told the woman in the Gospel, "Has no one condemned you?.. Neither do I condemn you."

As we move toward Easter, let us *go* to the Lord, seeing our own sins for what they are, and asking God's forgiveness. And let us be generous in our forgiveness of others.

*A woman caught in the act of adultery is brought to Jesus. He challenges anyone without sin to throw the first stone...John 8 1-11, John 11 1-45*

