

So I have this fear of turning into my father.

I arch an eyebrow into the mirror and see all too clearly the generation before me.  
I discover half-empty coffee cups strewn here and there and realize that Dad is nowhere around,  
so it must have been his son that left them there.

I am particularly terrified when I find myself on the verge of repeating myself.

I would rather not say anything than run the risk of saying the same thing over and over.  
I start stories with an apology in case I've told them before.

People ask me innocently if I re-preach sermons and I look at them like they are accusing  
me of murder.

God forbid I should do such a hideous, despicable, Dad-like thing!

Yet sometimes even God repeats God's self, when we need to hear things again for the  
first time, so it's probably okay for me to pull out a quote I've used before.

It is one we need to hear over and over again, from the gifted pen of Robert Farrar Capon:

*The church is not in the morals business.*

*The world is in the morals business, quite rightfully; and it has done a fine job of  
it, all things considered.*

*The history of the world's moral codes is a monument to the labors of many philosophers,  
and it is a monument of striking unity and beauty....*

*What the world cannot get right, however, is the forgiveness business -- and that, of  
course, is the church's real job.*

*She is in the world to deal with the Sin that the world can't turn off or escape from.*

*She is not in the business of telling the world what's right and wrong so that it  
can do good and avoid evil.*

*She is in the business of offering, to a world that knows all about that tiresome subject,  
forgiveness for its chronic unwillingness to take its own advice.*

*But the moment she even hints that morals, and not forgiveness, is the name of her game,  
she instantly corrupts the Gospel and runs headlong into blatant nonsense.*

(Capon, Robert Farrar. The Romance of the Word. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995, p. 345. )

Forgiveness, according to the Gospel giver John, is the reason that Pentecost happens, the  
purpose for which Jesus breathes out the Holy Spirit with a promise followed by a  
warning:

*Receive the Holy Spirit.*

*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any,  
they are retained.*

What is forgiveness, and why do we need the Holy Spirit to do it?

The Greek verb *to forgive* literally means *to let go*.

Letting go is something we don't do very well on our own.

We grasp, we clutch, we hoard, we protect--our things as well as our grudges, sins as well as stuff.

When someone wrongs us, we remember.

We tell the story years later, and the men in my family repeat it many times over.

We also allow the mistakes and the misdeeds of those who wrong us to discolor or destroy our relationships with them going forward.

Now, there is a healthy and appropriate survival instinct at work when we do this.

"Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me," goes the saying.

If someone regularly hurts you, don't go back.

Too many times the ideal of Christian forgiveness has been twisted into an excuse or a justification for abuse to continue.

And too many times the ideal of Christian forgiveness has been cheapened into a denial of real injury and injustice, as if it's a magic wand rather than a long, rigorous process.

Some sins cannot and should not be forgiven too easily, but they do need to be forgiven, because retaining them permits them too much power.

Real forgiveness is a complete letting go of sin, with mutually binding implications.

Forgiven sin is gone from our relationship; I can't bring up the pain you caused me nor can you cause the same pain again, because it has been dismissed, banished from our relationship--it has been let go, so it's gone.

Neither of us can hold it over the other's head because it is no longer there.

To do this, of course, to forgive rather than to retain, takes tremendous power.

That is why we need the Holy Spirit, which is the tremendous power of God.

It is the power that sweeps across the sea at creation and kindles a new community in the windstorm of Pentecost.

The Spirit is the power of God unleashed in the world, from the deeps of heaven out through a wildfire of truth, and from the soul of Jesus out through his lips, in each case the very life of God thrust upon and entrusted to the disciples.

This is more than regular, run-of-the-mill, tired human history power.

This is deeper than politics and warfare, the predictable power to regulate or destroy.

This is power to create and to renew.

This is power so strong it is able to be weak.

This is power so deep it has the courage to be crucified.

This is power so thoroughly complete it is able to let go.

The power of God named the Holy Spirit is also more than power.

It is, the church's wise theologians teach us, the very bond between God the Father and God the Son.

The Holy Spirit is the love that the Son and the Father share, the dance between them, their mutual delight and affection and commitment to one another, the living heart of their relationship with one another.

And because God is who God is, the one powerful enough to forgive, the one powerful enough to share everything and strong enough to totally let go, God lets go of the Spirit and shares it with us.

The open secret of who God is and what makes God tick is breathed out upon the disciples and blown out across Jerusalem.

This Spirit is a consuming fire in a cyclone, removing any and all obstacles to loving, just, and joyful community in its wake.

Young men and daughters prophesy; old men dream dreams and slaves are empowered; ageism and sexism and inequality and inhumanity are dismissed, banished, overcome, completely swept away.

In other words, they are forgiven, they are let go, and so they are gone.

Who are we, then, to retain what God wants to forgive?

Who are we to reduce our real business of forgiveness to the tedium of retentive morality?

Capon is right; the world is great at morals and it suffocates under the crushing weight of its own disappointments, its own failures, the grudges and histories and resentments and violence and vengeance and fears and idolatries and insecurities it cannot let go.

The sin we retain builds up until our hearts become garbage dumps and our souls are reduced to clogged toilets.

What the world does not need is another religion playing righteous cop.

What the world does need is hope, forgiveness, fresh air, fresh starts, the cleansing wind of Pentecost, the courageous power and permission and possibility of letting go.

This is why God shares with us the gift of the Holy Spirit, to clean our polluted air and empower us to stand up to the world with love gutsy enough to say, *Get over yourself and let it go.*

Forgive and move forward.

This will be hard for the world to accept, impossible if the world can't see it in us first.

Too much money and identity and power are tied up in power as control to risk power as letting go.

But power as letting go is the best and only hope the world has.

Which is why we proclaim the cross of Christ.

And why we need the Holy Spirit, to blow away the chaff in our lives and leave the grain, the image of God that is in us, the beauty and courage of love which is who we most truly are, albeit sometimes so buried beneath so much garbage we can barely believe it's really there.

The Holy Spirit comes to reveal who we truly are and to shape us into what God dreams us to be, which is essentially the same thing, a process that Protestant theologians call sanctification, or making holy.

Orthodox and early Christian theologians, however, have another, more daring, more faithful word for it.

They call it theosis: the process in which we become united with God, so forgiven and set free that we totally, fully share the life and love that God is.

The Holy Spirit comes, so we have this hope of turning into our Father.