

Cooling the fires of our past

Almost 100 wildfires are burning in the western United States today.

The smoke from these fires can be seen from satellites in space. The residents of Palo Alto, CA haven't seen the sun since August 17. The heat of some of the blazes have melted automobiles. Hundreds of homes have been destroyed. Thousands of people have been displaced. Dozens of lives have been lost.

These fires have no mercy.

I have never been in the path of a wildfire, not even a modest brush-fire.

I have been in the path of wounded relationships and people hellbent on revenge: After a divorce, a betrayal, a will that wasn't settled to everyone's liking, a mean word, a thoughtless deed.

I've also seen the aftermath of what forgiveness can bring. I've seen the toxicity of what *not* forgiving can do.

Let's be clear: forgiving a deep hurt can be one of the hardest things we do in life. But withholding forgiveness can scorch the soul.

It's like an all-consuming fire: the anger, the resentment, the bitterness. It all burns inside.

To allow ourselves to smolder with rage simply poisons life.

It is no wonder that Jesus commands us to walk the road of forgiveness in this Sunday's gospel (Matthew 18:21-35).

Pardoning does *not* mean there is no hurt. It isn't about excusing an injustice. Nor does it imply that the relationship doesn't need to change.

Forgiveness is about refusing to be imprisoned by the past. When we refuse to forgive, we keep dragging the wreckage with us. We remain locked and chained to what once was.

Ugh, how exhausting! And how draining for the people that have to be around us!

A grandmother recently shared with me: "There was a time when I was delighted to see my children and grandchildren inherit my bright blue eyes. Now I dread they will inherit the bitterness of my smoldering unresolved resentments.

Jesus wisely commands us: Walk the bittersweet path of forgiveness. When you have mercy on your adversary you are also bestowing mercy on yourself. In doing so, we are refusing to allow ourselves to be consumed by an angry inner "fire" that burns away joy, incinerates our sense of inner peace and tethers us to the debris of a time that no longer is.

Pray that we who have so often asked forgiveness ourselves, will not begrudge that same pardon to others.

Even when the path takes time and patience: Allow the grace of mercy to cool the embers of the past.

Fr. Steven Labaire