

## Michelle Kazanjian on how forgiveness is the only way to the life God intends for you

*Many of us struggle or have struggled or know people who struggle with various moral and theological teachings of the Catholic Church. Others of us, while not struggling so personally, find ourselves caught up in heated debates, defending doctrines that fly in the face of post-modern culture.*

*However, I want to talk with you about a hard teaching doesn't get much press at all, yet is perhaps the most universal ... and the most consequential. I'm talking about Jesus' command to forgive.*

*"This teaching is hard." This is what the disciples said to Jesus when he presented them with his teaching on forgiving our offenders seventy times seven times.*

*Forgiveness is a non-negotiable for Christians. Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." As we forgive. In the same way that we forgive. He also said, "The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you." In the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18), the story of the man who was forgiven a fortune and then throttled his fellow servant for a small debt, Jesus describes how this man was thrown into prison "to be tortured until he paid the last penny"—and then states, "Just so will your heavenly Father do to you if you do not forgive your brother from the heart."*

*This is not "gentle Jesus, come and squeeze us." This is serious stuff. Yet we refuse to forgive, we fail to forgive, we think it's impossible to forgive, we deceive ourselves or are deceived into believing that we don't need to forgive. I've done all of these. I'm 60 years old, and like most people my age, I've had my share of offenses, injuries and betrayals to work through. I can't share most of these stories in a public place like this, because they are not just my stories to share. But I do want to bring here a story that I hope will illustrate for you how, with the help of divine grace, forgiveness really sets us free to be the people we were created to be and live the lives we were meant to live.*

When I was about 37, my mother-in-law, who was divorced, called to say she was moving in with us. There wasn't really a discussion about it: my husband is Armenian, and I knew from the day I married him that, one day, his mom would be moving in with her two sons, sharing time between them. That's how it's done in the Armenian culture. I just didn't think it would be done so early!

As you might imagine it was difficult to have two women in the house. I was home-schooling five small children and now Grandma was there in the kitchen, out in the garage for smokes, getting in between me and the kids (alternately picking on them and spoiling them), needing companionship and care.

Grandma had never taken very good care of herself: she smoked, she was morbidly overweight, her hygiene was poor. As a nurse, I struggled with feeling judgmental and critical, and as her health failed, those feelings devolved into chronic anger. Every poor choice she made and every one she *had* made ended up costing me as much as it did her, in terms of stress, time, and physical exhaustion. I felt trapped in my situation and trapped in my resentment. Common refrains that went through my mind were, "I didn't ask for this," "Doesn't she care about me?" "How could she . . . ??"

After ten years, John's mom ended up on oxygen for emphysema, with unmanageable incontinence issues, heart failure, chronic infections, and limited mobility. She needed a careful routine of medication that she couldn't track herself, many trips to the various specialists, a diabetic and low-sodium diet, insulin shots, in-home therapy, and constant support.

She lost her freedom in stages: at first just limited by the medical equipment; then not driving; next not cooking, knitting, or doing the things she loved to do; eventually barely walking with a walker and needing help with all her self-care. She became depressed, cranky, and unwilling to do even the things that she *could* do for herself.

Even though we hired some help and also shared time with John's brother, the constant care we gave wore us down, wore me down. I could keep up a good front and do the right things, but inside, I was in turmoil every day. Even when Mom would thank me and say things like, "I'm so glad you're here. I'm so lucky to have a daughter like you. What would I do without you?" I felt a literal strangling feeling in my throat, as if I were smothering. Every night I would go

to bed and toss and turn, racked with guilt. I would desperately make resolutions, simple ones, like "I will look her in the eye tomorrow night at supper," or, "I will go into her room to sit down and talk for five minutes," or even "I will smile at her once." I couldn't keep these resolves. I was disgusted with myself. After all, I was a nurse! This care should be no problem for me, a no-brainer, second nature. Everyone had always considered me kind; my "charism" was mercy! What was my problem? And why were prayer, confession, resolution-making, and even counseling so ineffective at helping me to do the good that I really wanted to do?

People would often compliment us, saying how wonderful we were to take John's mom into our home, how saintly, what good witnesses: I hated that. I felt like a hypocrite. They would also gush over how wonderful it was for our kids. But I knew that my children were having as much difficulty as I was. In fact sometimes I'd catch one of them climbing out the bedroom window to get to the kitchen by way of the front door, rather than walk past Grandma's room, because she would call them to come in and do something for her...and they didn't want to do it.

My poor husband was caught in the middle of this conflict, and the dumping ground for all of that late-night turmoil. In the end, on one of Mom's stints away at my brother-in-law's home, we decided that it just wasn't going to work anymore. Mom couldn't come back again.

I felt terrible to let John down this way, and terrible for his mother, too: after all, she had cared for both her parents and then both her in-laws until they died in her home, and she had made it clear many times that it was "her turn now." I knew she would feel completely rejected by my decision to put her into a nursing home.

So at the same time that I giving up (on me), I wasn't giving up on God. I kept praying: "Lord, if you want me to care for Mom, you'll have to change my heart. I'm willing to be willing, but it has to be your work."

In one final attempt to get help, I made an appointment to talk through my situation with a skilled spiritual leader who could listen and pray with me. I was surprised when the conversation turned to forgiveness. I didn't think I had anything to forgive. I knew Mom's physical and emotional weaknesses, her difficult family history, how she had been abused, neglected, and rejected herself. I could understand and explain exactly why she acted as she did. She wasn't intentionally trying to hurt me; she wasn't doing anything "wrong." So what would I forgive her for?

The woman talking to me explained that forgiveness wasn't a judgment of the other person, but simply an acknowledgement that their actions had affected me negatively and caused pain. Forgiving didn't mean that I had no part in the problem, or that I hadn't done wrong myself. God would sort out who was to blame for what and how much. She said that forgiveness was the only way out of my spiritual and emotional prison, the only way to freedom: would I try it?

So, I first asked forgiveness of God for holding on to all that bitterness and I begged him to help me forgive. I spoke forgiveness out loud for the burdens that Mom had placed on me. Then, a litany of "forgivenesses" just poured out of me. I forgave her for not asking if she could move in, for not giving me an option. I forgave her for smoking, overeating, not taking care of herself. I forgave her for the way her needs and problems had dominated our family life and added stress to our home environment, strained our relationships. I forgave her for the difficulty she caused our children and for the times she criticized and hurt them. I forgave her for the times she criticized me for not taking care of John like a good Armenian wife would. I forgave her for not seeing me and my needs, for knowing me as a person, for not cherishing and nurturing me as her daughter but simply leaning on me as a care provider. As I did these words, God intervened and lifted the burden I was carrying. I felt the power of the Spirit come over me and wash away all that resentment and bitterness, all that guilt and shame. I knew in that moment that I was free.

But there was way to test of my new-found freedom. Grandma was still away, due to come back in a couple of months. And John wasn't convinced. He didn't want to take the risk and bank on an intangible sense I had that "something" had happened to change me. He insisted, "I'd rather have my Mom in a home than have my wife in one." So we proceeded as planned and reserved a spot for Mom at Manoogian Manor, an Armenian rest home.

I went through all the paperwork with a heavy heart. When Mom arrived back in Michigan, we had to take her to Manoogian for an evaluation. I couldn't go; I didn't want to see her face. So, John brought her there alone. He reported later that when they took the tour through the hallways, she turned to him and asked, "Don't these old people have anyone to love them?"

John cancelled her reservation then and there. And so I began the process of caring for his mother at home again. Wonderfully, although the work was the same, I was not. Every day I amazed myself!

I no longer felt smothered. I no longer resented the kids and John, trying to make everything *fair*, so that I wasn't doing more than "my share." I could look Grandma in the eye. I could touch her. I could be patient in explaining things. I could laugh with her. I could feel compassion for her. Sometimes I even caught a glimpse of her true self, her soul, the woman that the Lord created, who would be with him in heaven; in these moments, respect and reverence welled up inside of me.

Best of all, I could feel the Lord's pleasure in *me* as I cared for her. I felt like a different person—no, actually, I felt like *myself* again, the Michelle who had been locked up before and was now free to love.

Just in time. John's mom passed away peacefully in our house only five months after we brought her back that last time. My heart still constricts every time I consider what would have happened had God not intervened for me and for Mom, how different her death would have been and how different the memory would be for me. Only God knew how long the race would be, and he carried me for the last few laps.

Grandma died just before Holy Week, the Thursday before Palm Sunday. During that year's Passion celebration, the words that Christ spoke from the cross resonated in my heart: "It is finished." It *was* finished; thanks to the grace of forgiveness, it was finished well.