

# Becoming Zion

## Some Reflections on Forgiveness and Reconciliation

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Some years ago, I was confronted with the realization that other people's betrayal and deception, which eventually crescendoed into blatant and dehumanizing cruelty, might result in the loss of much of what I had worked for in my professional, ecclesial, and personal life. This situation drove me to a deep need to understand forgiveness, which I pursued through studying philosophical and theological perspectives on the topic as well as through personal reflection. Through specific academic opportunities that included fieldwork in Rwanda and South Africa, I discovered the voices of Latter-day Saint women who had gained hard-won knowledge and wisdom about forgiveness through their experiences of enduring genocide and apartheid. When I heard firsthand about their lives, I was able to see how their understanding of God and the gospel helped them navigate the complexity of forgiving others who had perpetrated major harms against them without causing them to further harm themselves. Through my encounters with them, I realized that although I had studied and written on the topic of forgiveness in academic contexts,<sup>1</sup> I wanted more insight from personal study of the scriptures. As a practicing Latter-day Saint, I became interested in examining the unique resources that the restored gospel offers on this

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1. See Deidre Nicole Green, "Works of Love in a World of Violence: Kierkegaard, Feminism, and the Limits of Self-Sacrifice," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 568–83; Deidre Nicole Green, *Works of Love in a World of Violence: Kierkegaard, Feminism, and the Limits of Self-Sacrifice* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016); Deidre Nicole Green, "Radical Forgiveness" in *Love and Justice*, ed. Ingolf U. Dalferth and Trevor W. Kimball (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 183–205.

topic. This essay combines what I have learned through my academic study, my personal study of the gospel, the wisdom of other Latter-day Saint women, and my own life lessons.

### Defining Forgiveness

I have learned that a genuine definition of forgiveness must take into consideration the situation of those who have been wronged, and that this consideration must include an awareness of the disparate levels of power between those who have been wronged and those who have committed the wrong. Forgiveness cannot be coerced or compelled, and it ought not be conceived in overly simplistic or facile ways, particularly when those who are in a position to forgive are disempowered and marginalized. Bringing a feminist lens to any vision of Christian love demands deliberating over complex questions about how to forgive in ways that neither leave people excessively vulnerable to revictimization and injustice nor place undue burdens on marginalized and disempowered persons to forgive. A helpful framework for analyzing the entangled issues involved in forgiveness comes from one theologian who warns, “Versions of cheap . . . forgiveness create the illusion of caring about the quality of human relations while simultaneously masking the ways in which people’s lives are enmeshed in patterns of destructiveness.” He asserts that such counterfeit forms “of forgiveness often exacerbate human destructiveness precisely because their illusions and masking create a moral and political vacuum.”<sup>2</sup> In his view, we must avoid two dangers: on the one hand, “a cheap therapeutic forgiveness,” and on the other, the “eclipse of forgiveness by encroaching darkness.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, forgiveness ought to neither be reduced to an unreflective and thoughtless conciliation nor be cynically written off as utterly impossible. In this brief essay, I begin to sketch out a theology of forgiveness that avoids both cynicism and the denial of the gravity of wrongdoing, a theology that I believe points us toward becoming Zion.

Forgiveness requires love, and it also works to further cultivate love. In the personal experience mentioned above, I found that in seeking insight from the divine about how I could possibly be in such a situation, the only answer that ever came was “You’re the one who wanted to learn to love—I already know how.” I knew that part of why I was confronting this situation was to learn to love in a way more akin to how God loves. Margaret

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2. L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 6.

3. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 33.

Farley, emeritus professor of Christian ethics at Yale Divinity School, has written that there is “no genuine Christian forgiveness without love, and love is sometimes tested in its ultimate possibility and imperative by the forgiveness it generates.”<sup>4</sup> In the divine sphere, mercy cannot rob justice (Alma 42:25). For this reason, I understand that forgiveness must be in the service of justice as well as love,<sup>5</sup> lest it undermine the strength of our relationships. As an aspect of authentic communal life, particularly for a community striving to become Zion, forgiveness allows a diverse group of imperfect people to remain cohesive. Forgiveness offers itself as resistance against all the forces that would otherwise tear us apart. I have come to view forgiveness and reconciliation as essential means to our becoming<sup>6</sup>—both as individuals and as a Zion community, which scripture describes as a people “of one heart and one mind, [dwelling] in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18).

### The Renewal of Forgiveness

Forgiveness renews the individual who has been wronged and makes her growth possible. For Christians, forgiveness stands as an absolute moral imperative: we ought to forgive everyone all of the time because our own forgiveness by God is conditional on our choices to forgive others (Matt. 6:14–15); additionally, we ought to forgive others just as God, for Christ’s sake, has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32). Commenting in a 1924 Relief Society general conference on the difficult challenge this doctrine poses, Jennie Brimhall Knight taught, “To those who have been sorely tried and bitterly offended, remember it requires a prayerful, generous, and merciful heart coupled with a strong will to forgive, but remember also, an unforgiving heart places a barrier between itself and God’s forgiveness.”<sup>7</sup> Referencing Matthew 18:21–35, Knight reemphasized that one is to forgive all people their trespasses *from one’s heart*.<sup>8</sup> This means that forgiveness is neither trite nor superficial but requires

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4. Margaret A. Farley, *Changing the Questions: Explorations in Christian Ethics*, ed. Jamie L. Manson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2015), 319.

5. This is taken from the title of an essay found in Farley, *Changing the Questions*, 319–42.

6. Kelly Oliver, “Forgiveness and Community,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 42 (2004, supplement): 1–2. Oliver alludes to her reliance upon Hegel, primarily from his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in her analysis, yet does not cite him closely on these points.

7. Jennie Brimhall Knight, “Forgiveness Is Like Mercy,” in *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women*, ed. Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 125.

8. Knight, “Forgiveness Is Like Mercy,” 124.

an inner willingness that effects an internal transformation of the one who forgives. It is the one who chooses to undergo this transformation by forgiving that benefits at least as much as the one who is forgiven. Knight highlighted what she dubbed “unforgiveness” as a particularly vexing pitfall along the path that leads to happiness.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that in the Book of Mormon, it is a specific sort of forgiveness—one that is unconditional, lavish, generous, and offered without restraint—that is lifted up as exemplary.<sup>10</sup>

Yet the Book of Mormon also introduces an internal tension around the issue of forgiveness. Alma states that we need to forgive our neighbor when *he says that* he repents (Mosiah 26:31). This echoes much of what is expressed in the previous paragraph. Moroni, however, offers a striking qualification, stating that in order to be forgiven, members of the church must seek forgiveness *with real intent* (Moro. 6:8). This tension demands discernment in order to know how to approach a particular situation. Moroni seems to give us a safeguard against manipulation or facile forgiveness that might hinder rather than foster real change, both on the part of the perpetrator and the victim. He does this by allowing us to set boundaries between ourselves and someone who seems likely to become a repeat offender, given that their request for forgiveness is not totally sincere and therefore not totally indicative of change. As one contemporary theologian explains, forgiveness is not the same as resignation to abusive behaviors or unjust circumstances. “Acceptance of suffering is not an inherent characteristic of love; only resistance to suffering is. . . . What love really requires is resistance towards the abuse.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Elder David E. Sorensen maintains that “forgiveness of sins should not be confused with tolerating evil. . . . Although we must forgive a neighbor who injures us, we should still work constructively to prevent that injury from being repeated.”<sup>12</sup> These theological perspectives, like Moroni’s qualification, attune us to the fact that forgiving is not just about the transformation of the one who forgives; it is also intended to facilitate the transformation of the one who is forgiven.

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9. Knight, “Forgiveness Is Like Mercy,” 123.

10. Nephi recounts that he “frankly” forgave his brothers (1 Ne. 7:21). *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “frankly,” accessed November 20, 2018, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/74240>.

11. Asle Eikrem, *God as Sacrificial Love: A Systematic Exploration of a Controversial Notion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 110–11.

12. David E. Sorensen, “Forgiveness Will Change Bitterness to Love,” *Ensign* 33, no. 5 (May 2003): 12.

Forgiveness is a creative act that brings about something new and allows for the progress and freedom of the individual who is forgiven. Philosopher Julia Kristeva understands forgiving as choosing to allow another to make a new person of herself, creating a new narrative that has passed “through the love of forgiveness” and has been “transferred to the love of forgiveness.”<sup>13</sup> It is further freeing to the one who forgives in that it allows her to act independently of the wrongdoer’s actions, whereas before her agency had been compromised by the wrongdoer’s act itself as well as by her reactivity to it. Naming the problems of irreversibility and unpredictability in all human action, Hannah Arendt asserts that forgiveness is “the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences *both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.*”<sup>14</sup> She holds that since we “cannot stop acting as long as we live, we must never stop forgiving either.”<sup>15</sup> Because it is the “only reaction that acts in an unexpected way,” forgiveness “retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, it does not respond to unjust or unloving actions in a way that is dictated by those actions but in a way that involves more agency and creativity on the part of the one who is harmed and is in a position to forgive. In contrast to vengeance, forgiveness affords a new beginning, releasing us from some consequences of the past, even if it does not undo them.<sup>17</sup> Another scholar elaborating on Arendt’s insights emphasizes that “without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would,

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13. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1989), 204.

14. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 241, emphasis mine. Forgiveness is a free and creative act in part because it does not depend upon anything external to the one who chooses to forgive. As Timothy Jackson puts it, forgiveness does not require something on the part of the forgiven—it presupposes nothing more than freedom and guilt. It is a gift that, for Jackson, is “literally a giving-in-advance and without qualification.” Timothy P. Jackson, *The Priority of Love: Christian Charity and Social Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 140. Note also: highlighting the power of forgiveness to free individuals from the irreversibility of their actions, Arendt understands forgiveness as the “possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done.” Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237.

15. Hannah Arendt, “The Tradition of Political Thought,” in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 57.

16. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 241.

17. Marguerite La Caze, “Promising and Forgiveness,” in *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*, ed. Patrick Hayden (Durham: Acumen, 2014), 213.

as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover,” so that, in effect, “we would remain the victims of its consequences forever.”<sup>18</sup> As an active choice, forgiveness is a form of sacrifice that frees both the wrongdoer and the one harmed from the past. This sacrifice includes not only giving up a claim that could otherwise be pressed but also giving up an ideal about who the wrongdoer should have been by loving and accepting who she is and seeing her actions clearly. At the same time, forgiveness allows the one who is forgiven to believe that she is seen in a new light and is no longer beholden to the image of who she was at the time of wrongdoing.

My own life experience and the experiences of others have taught me the value of forgiveness for becoming unencumbered by the weight of past mistakes and sufferings. My insight that my experiences could help me learn to love in a more godly way did not resolve for me the issue that other people’s attitudes and actions toward me seemed to be able to hinder my ability to become who I wanted to be and realize the objectives I had set for my life. Yet I have come to the understanding that no matter how hurt or hindered I might have been by others’ choices, only my own choice not to forgive them could have the power to damn me so ultimately. Forgiveness has enabled me to progress toward my goals despite the harms and obstacles introduced by others’ actions, unobstructed by blame, resentment, or bitterness. Part of what forgiveness resists is the complacency and passivity that succumbs to old patterns of relating and old images of self and others that otherwise remain static and in perpetual reaction to each other. In the absence of forgiveness, people become stymied and immobilized, “forever doomed to relive a broken history.”<sup>19</sup> Many African women I have spoken with have confirmed this truth: both individual and collective progress prove to be impossible in the absence of forgiveness and reconciliation.

One young Rwandan woman, whose father was killed in the 1994 genocide, has an ongoing debate about the relationship between forgiveness and justice with her sister, who refuses to forgive their father’s murderer. In speaking with her sister, she insists, “You need to move on. You need to forgive them for you to be able to move on and be whatever you want to be.” The young woman views forgiveness as a real option that brings more freedom and growth. Further, she believes that the greater injustice is to continually reduce the perpetrator, as well as his family, to the status

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18. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237.

19. Paul O. Ingram, ed., *Constructing a Relational Cosmology*, Princeton Monograph Series 62 (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2006), ch. 3.

of enemies and even to the unjust act itself. She emphatically declares, “We’re not going to do the same thing to his children because that’s going to be . . . a circle and it’s not justice.”<sup>20</sup> The refusal to forgive, according to this young woman, debilitates everyone involved by imprisoning them according to their past actions and identities in an inescapable cycle that renders both individual and communal growth unattainable. Rather than viewing forgiveness as circumventing justice, her notion of justice actually relies upon forgiveness, which frees everyone to become better selves and therefore better members of the larger community.

Forgiveness enables us to escape the death that comes through sin and evil and pass from death to life. Escaping the death that comes about through sin and evil, we not only return to life but also invite the possibility of *new* life.<sup>21</sup> As it is through love for one another that we pass “from death to life” (1 Jn. 3:14, NRSV), to struggle for relentless love through forgiveness and reconciliation is to embrace the abundant life promised by the Christian gospel (John 10:10). It is a way in which we reclaim life from all of the myriad forces that would rob us of it. Forgiveness is, in effect, the means by which we bring about our own spiritual resurrection. This imagery points to Jesus Christ who pleads from the cross for the forgiveness of those that kill him (Luke 23:34), pushing back against evil and destruction. In this exemplary instance, forgiveness actively resists the passivity of suffering and manifests that love is in fact stronger than death by refusing to relinquish love and thereby succumb to sin even in the face of death (see Song 8:6). Merciful love, not sin, has the final word in Christ’s mortal life, and this ought to inform how followers of Christ live out their lives as well.

Forgiveness makes it possible to see others and ourselves not as static and trapped but as susceptible to renewal and worthy of love. Simone Weil observes, “Men owe us what we imagine they will give us. We must forgive them this debt. To accept the fact that they are other than the creatures of our imagination is to imitate the renunciation of God. I also am other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness.”<sup>22</sup> Forgiveness involves seeing ourselves and others as what we are: fallible human beings rather than idealized versions of ourselves that can exist only in our minds. This demands that we take responsibility for how we

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20. Anonymous, interview by Deidre Green, August 11, 2016, p. 14, Women, Religion, and Transitional Justice in South Africa and Rwanda Oral Histories, repository. See Green, “Radical Forgiveness,” 191.

21. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 88.

22. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 9.

see ourselves and others, acknowledging that seeing itself entails an act of volition. Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre articulates that when I am seen, I am a defenseless creature in the face of the other's infinite freedom. Objectified by the look of the other, I experience myself as fixed in my place in the world.<sup>23</sup> In light of this insight about the fixity involved in being seen, we might say that when one asks for forgiveness, one asks to be seen differently: not just as a wrongdoer but as someone who has, by way of repentance, transcended those acts and is no longer identical with the one who committed the wrong.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, self-forgiveness is less a matter of altering one's perspective about what has taken place than it is a matter of interpreting oneself differently.<sup>25</sup> Some self-reproach about past mistakes may remain and even be in order, and yet forgiveness mitigates the power of those mistakes, so that we "can now live well enough."<sup>26</sup> Insofar as we have a "decision to make about how to see,"<sup>27</sup> we can come to see ourselves and others with more love and compassion, as fundamentally good *and* fully accountable for the evils we commit, with an understanding that we have the agency to change and become better as we repair the wrongs we commit against others and ourselves.

## Love and Justice

Forgiveness, in order to be real and complete, calls for both love and justice. One who has been wronged must learn to love the one who has wronged her, desiring the moral betterment of that person as well as herself. Therefore, forgiveness requires the naming of injustices, violations, and harms, as well as a call for reparations. These actions are done not just out of self-love, but out of a love for one's neighbors, including those who are one's enemies. Yet freeing ourselves and others for a new future

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23. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Routledge, 2003), 292–93.

24. Joseph Beatty, "Forgiveness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1970): 246–52, cited in Robin S. Dillon, "Self-Forgiveness and Self-Respect," *Ethics* 112 (October 2001): 79.

25. Dillon, "Self-Forgiveness and Self-Respect," 79.

26. Dillon, "Self-Forgiveness and Self-Respect," 83.

27. Dillon, "Self-Forgiveness and Self-Respect," 80. Margaret Farley opines that making efforts to re-envision ourselves and others is also a means of *maintaining* love. She states that "the way to keep our love alive is to try to keep seeing," insisting that we ought to "attend' more carefully, more consistently—as we heighten our capacity to see." Margaret A. Farley, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 54. On understanding how we see as a matter of will, see Robert C. Solomon, *About Love: Reinventing Romance for Our Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 78, 126. See Green, *Works of Love in a World of Violence*, 127.



must not circumvent the rigorous work of acknowledging and naming the wrongs committed in the past. Because I believe that the promotion of justice is inherent in the work of forgiveness, which is impelled by love, I endorse a definition of forgiveness as willing “the well-being of victim and violator *in the fullest possible knowledge of the nature of the violation.*”<sup>28</sup> More than this, forgiveness extends to laboring for the moral betterment of wrongdoers so that forgiveness frees them in truly lasting ways. This means that naming others’ wrongs against us and calling for their reparative actions is done out of both a vital self-love and a love for the perpetrator, who is also a neighbor. Because love and justice are not counter to each other but rather conducive to each other, forgiveness must be mutually informed by both of these divine attributes that human beings are called to embrace and enact. As we individually and collectively cultivate these attributes of love and justice within ourselves, forgiveness and reconciliation become more than processes—they become the way in which we are oriented toward the world. As we come to embody forgiveness, we can become the place “where God,” who is love, “in truth is.”<sup>29</sup>

### The Role of Community

Because the processes of naming injustices, violations, and harms—and also the call for reparations—are communal, they involve the community in the work of forgiveness in ways that can lead toward a Zion society. The Zion community must learn to treat both perpetrators and victims in ways that are appropriately just and merciful. In his great essay on the Atonement, Eugene England called Latter-day Saints to seek to engender within ourselves and our community the kind of love that could encompass everyone: “Each of us must come to a kind of love that can be extended equally to victim and victimizer, dispossessed and dispossessor—and even to ourselves—a kind of love that moves us to demand justice in society and within ourselves and then goes beyond justice to offer forgiveness and healing and beyond guilt to offer redemption and newness of life.”<sup>30</sup> Developing the kind of love that can extend forgiveness without shortchanging justice is necessary for

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28. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 145, emphasis added. See Green, “Radical Forgiveness,” 192.

29. Søren Kierkegaard, *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 23. See Green, “Radical Forgiveness,” 204.

30. Eugene England, “That They Might Not Suffer: The Gift of Atonement,” *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy* 8, no. 4, article 5 (1982): 26–27.

cultivating a Zion community and further offers the means whereby we can develop our divine potential as we rely on the enabling power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Through the Atonement of Christ, members of the Zion community can learn to hope for others to be redeemed and therefore to hope for their own redemption. Latter-day Saint leader and educator Francine Bennion explains how forgiveness attends to wounds on both sides of relationships by considering the extensiveness of Christ's atoning work: "As I think of the atonement of Christ, it seems to me that if our sins are to be forgiven, the results of them must be erased. If my mistakes are to be forgiven, other persons must be healed from any effects of them. In the same way, if other persons are to be released by the atonement, then we must be healed from their mistakes."<sup>31</sup> This understanding of atonement parallels a conception of restorative justice as bidirectional such that both victim and perpetrator can be redeemed. I believe that it is primarily through forgiveness that one demonstrates a willingness both to be redeemed and to see others be redeemed. Further, it is through forgiveness that one plays a role in the redemption of others—whether that is the redemption from the wounds of trauma imposed by others or the redemption from the sin of inflicting pain on those whom we ought to have treated with love.

This willingness both to be redeemed and allow others the experience of redemption parallels loving one's neighbor as oneself (see Matt. 22:39). One Christian Zimbabwean woman I interviewed reflected on the fact that often a lack of self-love results in a diminished ability to forgive oneself and to forgive others, explaining this in terms of the fact that Christianity teaches we must love our neighbors as ourselves. She reasoned that this is because self-love must precede the ability to love other people.<sup>32</sup> To her, an inability to forgive another implies a lack of love of self, indicative of seeing oneself as unworthy of redemption—an attitude that subsequently extends to others. To properly love oneself is both to free the self from the suffering of resentment against a wrongdoer and to offer freedom to that wrongdoer.<sup>33</sup> Our beliefs about others' worthiness of forgiveness and God's willingness to forgive them mirrors

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31. Francine R. Bennion, "A Latter-day Saint Theology of Suffering," in Reeder and Holbrook, *At the Pulpit*, 230.

32. Anonymous, interview by Deidre Green, August 1, 2016, transcript 85, p. 16, *Women, Religion, and Transitional Justice in South Africa and Rwanda Oral Histories*.

33. Anonymous, interview by Deidre Green, August 1, 2016, transcript 85, p. 16.

our sense of our own worthiness of forgiveness. Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard writes, “If you refuse to forgive, then you actually want something else: you want to make God hard-hearted so that he, too, would not forgive—how then could this hard-hearted God forgive you? If you cannot bear people’s faults against you, how then should God be able to bear your sins against him?”<sup>34</sup> That is to say that forgiveness of others, defined in part as a willingness to see others redeemed, directly correlates to our own willingness to be redeemed. Conversely, if, as the Christian gospel suggests, the experience of being forgiven impels me to forgive, then to realize the imperative to forgive fully, I must receive forgiveness and forgive myself. Otherwise, my understanding of divine mercy must remain incomplete.

Within a community striving to become Zion, all members must learn to extend love and justice to one another. A reconciled, life-giving Zion community is possible when “many high ones [are] brought low, and . . . many low ones [are] exalted” (D&C 112:8). This entails that people with relative power humble themselves and become vulnerable by inviting those they have harmed to voice the pain they have experienced. Recall Jesus’s teaching in the New Testament: “If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar . . . ; first be reconciled to your brother or sister” (Matt. 5:23–24, NRSV). In other words, those who have caused offense need to set aside outward practices of piety in order to make amends with those who have suffered injustice and a lack of love—a lack of being desired and affirmed by the communities to which they belong. This hard work requires communities to recognize that the only way out of pain is through it.<sup>35</sup> Rather than willfully ignoring or covering over harms that have been done, such a community must acknowledge that forgiveness entails a “lifetime investment in naming ourselves and each other as *we are* and as *we can be* in the continuing evolution of our humanity.”<sup>36</sup> This process of moral and communal evolution requires us to rigorously engage our need for change on personal and social levels; this process includes being able both to extend and receive forgiveness and to forgive ourselves.

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34. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 384.

35. Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*, ed. Douglas C. Abrams (New York: Harper One, 2014), 103.

36. Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 14, emphasis added. See Green, “Radical Forgiveness,” 192.

We can see one possible model for how to engage this challenging work in the Latter-day Saint film *Jane and Emma*. Throughout the film, Emma and Joseph Smith appear to advocate for Jane Manning James in multiple ways despite the racism she suffers from others. However, in what I consider to be a key moment of the film, Jane enumerates for Emma the many ways in which Emma has failed to be an ally to Jane through Emma's own unjust actions, including being silent when she should have stood up for Jane, thereby failing to protect Jane from others in the Nauvoo community—a community aspiring to become Zion. Jane's articulation of her personal suffering highlights how her community falls short of achieving their own ideal, and this articulation is absolutely crucial in order to enable the community to eventually achieve this ideal. Rather than dismiss Jane's grievances, deny the truth of her accusations, or walk away from her criticism, Emma chooses to remain and to hear Jane out as tears fill her own eyes. I take this scene as a model for what we can do today in the Latter-day Saint community—those with relative privilege must listen to those who have been overlooked, demeaned, or treated unfairly. Moreover (in order to live in accordance with Christ's injunction to be reconciled to our sisters and brothers before offering a gift to God, as discussed above), those with relative privilege and power whose sisters or brothers have something against them must not just listen willingly when confronted; they must go further by actually initiating such conversations, creating a space for communication, and inviting those who have been wronged to name their hurts and set the agenda for the reparative work that can restore relationships and allow everyone to move forward together.

At the same time, these types of restorative practices need not be limited by necessitating that the individual wrongdoer initiate reparation, especially when that is not possible. Particularly in terms of systemic injustices, such as racism, those on the side of privilege can seek to repair a broken history by listening, even if they are not directly responsible for that broken history. An illustrative example comes from a woman who attended the Maxwell Institute Symposium on Forgiveness and Reconciliation on May 30, 2018.<sup>37</sup> She shared that listening to the talk given by Joseph Sebarenzi, a survivor of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, was especially meaningful for her because the genocide took place when she was a young adult—it stands out in her mind as the first major conflict she was aware of at an age when she felt a responsibility as

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37. Video of Joseph Sebarenzi's talk, as well as Mpho Tutu van Furth's talk, are available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8EDjFE-07w>, accessed November 20, 2018.

an American, and so she also internalized much guilt when the United States failed to offer aid and intervention in a timely manner. She shared with me that listening to Sebarenzi, a former speaker of the Rwandan Parliament, was healing for her because even though she could do nothing to help the Rwandan people in 1994, she could listen to Sebarenzi tell his story of suffering and survival now. Not only was it healing for the survivor to share his story, which detailed the loss of much of his family and the destruction done to his country, but it was also healing to listen to that story for someone only indirectly involved but who for years had internalized guilt as a member of a country that chose to remain a bystander. Listening to the hurts we—or the communities we identify with—cause and have caused in the historical past is part of the work of healing and reconciliation, even if separation from the events through time or geographical distance allows us to believe they are so remote that they no longer demand resolution.

This truth was poignantly and profoundly impressed upon me during an interview with a Catholic woman in Rwanda. I asked her, “What does reconciliation mean to you?” She responded simply, “This is reconciliation.” A bit puzzled, I looked quizzically at the interpreter and back at the woman. I probed further to try to understand what she meant. She stated clearly and powerfully, “I am black and you are white, and we are sitting here talking to each other. This is reconciliation.” Although she and I had never met prior to the interview and so had never even had occasion to experience racial tension between us, we represented different groups with a long-standing history of unjust relations—I represented a privileged white colonialist who she could expect to want nothing more than to use her for my own ends by extracting information from her, and who would see her and treat her as less than myself. Yet we chose to engage in dialogue, sitting together and looking into one another’s eyes. By doing so, we made one small step toward healing the nearly unspeakable pains of the past and reconciling the larger communities we each represent.

Two examples of the kind of forgiveness that genuinely offers the possibility of a healed, restored community—a Zion community—are the Old Testament story of Joseph of Egypt and the story of Julia Mavimbela, a Black South African Latter-day Saint woman who lived in Soweto at the time of apartheid. The possibility of a reconciled community rests on individual choices to give and receive forgiveness. The story of Joseph found in Genesis illustrates this dynamic. When finally faced with the brothers who had left him for dead, Joseph told them that despite their evil intentions, God was able to work through the situation to bring

about redemption not only for Joseph but for the abusive brothers who had sold him, as well as his entire nation. Joseph states, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones” (Gen. 50:20–21, NRSV). Unequivocal that his brothers’ behavior was evil, Joseph refuses to offer a mitigating explanation or to deny or minimize the harms done. Yet even as he names the evil, he makes plain that God’s redemptive action is already—and always has been—at work. Joseph’s wording conveys that God does not intend, orchestrate, or even condone the evil committed by human beings but that God refuses to be foiled by the evil of human beings. And this is, I believe, a point on which divine life proves exemplary for human life. Moreover, by acknowledging God’s salvific action in his own life, Joseph recognizes that he has been redeemed from his suffering and the sins of others; this presumably makes him more willing to see his perpetrators as able to be redeemed from their sin. Because he sees his own life as redeemed and himself as fundamentally redeemable, he is better able to view others in this way. When given the chance to punish or attack his brothers, Joseph instead shows them who they are and reveals to them their own story anew, in a redemptive light.<sup>38</sup>

One young Rwandan Latter-day Saint woman echoes the insight that Joseph demonstrates. She states that her mother taught her the following: “Forgive your sisters. If you don’t forgive them, already you will reduce the love with which you love them. One day you can even kill them. You have to forgive them.”<sup>39</sup> Although Joseph might not have killed his brothers, he was in a position to retaliate against them by leaving them for dead when they came to him for deliverance from famine. Yet because he could forgive and see the divine grace operative in his own life, he could extend grace and give life to his desperate family. This story demonstrates how forgiveness both requires and allows us to

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38. Womanist scholar M. Shawn Copeland has pointed out that Joseph doesn’t assault his brothers, but instead he shows them who they are. M. Shawn Copeland, “Faith, Hope, and Love Today: Challenges and Opportunities” (paper, Claremont Graduate University, April 15–16, 2016). I would add to this that Joseph shows his brothers that they are individuals who can be redeemed, and he also shows them that although the sins they have committed against another human being are truly evil in a way that cannot be ignored or overlooked, their sins are not so great that they can preempt God’s redemptive possibilities in the life of the person they have wronged or even in their own lives.

39. Anonymous, interview by Deidre Green, August 11, 2016, transcript 94, p. 14, *Women, Religion, and Transitional Justice in South Africa and Rwanda Oral Histories*.

choose to see ourselves and each other differently.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps one reason that Joseph is such a salient figure in the Book of Mormon is due to his example of forgiveness toward his brothers, who represent disparate tribes. Joseph looms throughout a text in which myriad forms of strife, sin, oppression, and alienation abound—largely as a result of the family schism between the Lamanites and Nephites, and perhaps in part because he offers an example of how reconciliation can heal the multiple social consequences of schism.

Julia Mavimbela, a Black woman who lived in Soweto under apartheid and who was baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is an example of the way that forgiveness can lead to activism aimed at bringing about justice and reconciliation. By her own account, Mavimbela struggled with bitterness and hatred after her husband was killed in an automobile collision with a white man. Although evidence pointed to the other driver being responsible for the crash, white police officers attributed the crash to Mavimbela's deceased husband, a determination that was based on the officers' racial bias. Attesting to her own grief due to the tragedy and the injustice surrounding it, Julia had the following inscribed on her husband's tombstone: "But the lump remains," referring to the lump in the throat of a person in mourning. She explains, "The lump that remained was one of hatred and bitterness—for the man who caused the accident, for the policeman who lied, [and] for the court who deemed my husband responsible for the accident that took his life." Yet the political situation of the time impelled Mavimbela to move beyond her bitterness. In the mid-1970s, Soweto erupted in violence over racial injustice. As Mavimbela described it, "Soweto became unlike any place we had known—it was as if we were in a battlefield." She felt that she must seek healing for herself and her community in order to resist the possibility of becoming even more embittered. To this end, she established a community garden. As she taught local children who were immersed in institutionalized forms of oppression, hatred, and othering how to cultivate and care for life, she enjoined them, "Let us dig the soil of bitterness, throw in a seed of love, and see what fruits it can give us. . . . Love will not come without forgiving others."<sup>41</sup> Julia Mavimbela's example teaches that forgiveness is how we ensure that violence, however it manifests in our own lives,

40. Robin S. Dillon, "Self-Forgiveness and Self-Respect," *Ethics* 112 (October 2001): 79.

41. Julia Mavimbela, quoted in Matthew K. Heiss, "Healing the Beloved Country: The Faith of Julia Mavimbela," *Ensign* 47, no. 7 (July 2017): 42–43.

does not become the master of us all.<sup>42</sup> She further shows that valuing forgiveness means actively working to bring about a community with a more expansive sense of itself. Mavimbela's own healing—and her own becoming—took place not in isolation, but as she worked to help her community become a forgiving, reconciled community, one might say a Zion community. This same call to work toward reconciliation extends itself to all of us so that we can collaboratively realize the vision of a Zion community as we struggle together to embody a Christlike love that is both just and merciful, that is able to encompass all.

### Conclusion

A unified and just community requires reflective and conscientious practices of forgiveness and reconciliation in order to sustain itself and allow all of its members to flourish. While these practices confront us with some of our greatest challenges, they are what make joyful life possible in a world full of fallible human beings in constant relation. The need for these practices applies in both the private and the political spheres and must be implemented on both personal and institutional levels. Those who have been harmed by injustices and misdeeds are able to reclaim life through these vital means of forgiveness and reconciliation. Yet because the life that is reclaimed remains inescapably communal, we must learn to live with both perpetrators and victims in ways that appropriately engage love, justice, and mercy. Forgiveness and reconciliation must be leveraged to resist the countless forces that work to vitiate the relationships that would constitute Zion; this work includes preserving authenticity and resilience within these various relations. Through our intentional and creative uses of agency in the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation, we can facilitate transformation within ourselves, others, and our entire community in order to truly become Zion.

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42. See Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 69.