

The Weaponization of Forgiveness

Season 2, Episode 5 | Rev. Alba Onofrio

[00:18] Oh beloved, hi. Welcome to the second season of Love Letters with me, Reverend Sex. I've been thinking about you so much recently. All the time, really. We may not have met in person, I may not be able to recognize your face or your name yet, but I can feel you here with me, in my spirit and in my bones. I've been praying for us. I pray for our people, now more than ever. I'm obsessed with how we find each other, how we connect and heal, especially now, amidst the violent chaos and spiritual overwhelm in these hard and painful days, sins generations deep now surfacing.

[01:06] This series is part of the Shameless Theology Podcast channel brought to you by Soulforce. And Love Letters is a spirit space to laugh and grieve, to unlearn the bad theology we've been taught, and most importantly, a place for us to gather for just a few minutes each week, to find each other and remember who we really are. I believe in our sacred resistance and I believe in us. These are my love letters to you and all of us who need them.

[01:39] Welcome. I'm so glad you're here. Beloved, it is late here in Mexico as I come to you. I have been sitting with so much of the news of the world and I am spending some time tonight reflecting on forgiveness. So I am going to dedicate this love letter to those of us who have a hard time forgiving. You know, a while back, I was doing some teaching on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica. And in one of these workshops, we met a young woman who was just 18.

[02:27] And she was young and beautiful. And as we connected more and more about the concepts of spiritual violence and religious abuse, she shared a story with us that she hadn't ever really talked about out loud. She had a son who was almost six. If you do the math, that would have had her giving birth around 12 years old. And so many places in the world, there are young girls, children, 12, 13, 14, giving birth to children or dying in the process.

[03:10] And this particular girl was explaining how her heart's desire was to be able to be included in the liturgical dance group at her evangelical church. This was a church that she grew up in, and it had been something she had wanted since she was a little girl, seeing the older teenage girls and young women be a part of this dance group for God. She was deeply religious, believed deeply in the church. And when we asked her why she couldn't be in this dance troupe, why this was her heart's desire and not her lived reality, she explained that she couldn't because she was impure, because she was dirty and had sinned because she had had a child out of wedlock.

[04:05] And when we learned a little bit more about how young she had been when she got pregnant and when she had her son, we found out many steps down her story that she had been abused by one of the elders in the church, not the pastor, but one of the leading men, one of the disciples. And the whole church knew, they all knew that this was that man's son. They all knew about the abuse. Of course, they didn't call it that.

[04:37] And she alone bared the burden of having had a child out of wedlock. And therefore her dream within her church community was entirely unattainable because she had been branded as someone who was sinful and a sinner. In this time where we are hearing more and more about the Epstein files and seeing the devastating consequences of sexual abuse, of entire systems that are built around powerful men to protect them, and people coming out and being brave enough to share their stories, I am reminded so closely about how sometimes our theological concepts and ideas sound really normalized and right when we're in church communities, but how if we analyze them a little bit more, they can be used for great harm, just like they can be used for healing.

[05:41] So now I'm thinking about forgiveness and particularly the weaponization of forgiveness. As Christians, most of us are taught that it is our moral duty to forgive those who harm us. We are taught that we're supposed to love our enemies and turn the other cheek. If you think about, if you've ever heard, or if you've ever had it used against you, Matthew 18, 22, where Jesus talks about, we are supposed to forgive either 77 times or 70 times, seven times. That's a lot of times for forgiveness.

[06:26] Even something as foundational to many people's faith as the Lord's Prayer, we say, you know, Father, which art in heaven, and we get down a little bit farther and we say, forgive us our sins or forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who have sinned against us or have trespassed against us. So we're basically saying in that prayer that God should forgive us only to the measure that we forgive others. And, you know, this makes sense in a religion that centers grace and that grace was freely given to us.

[07:05] And therefore we kind of have to pay it forward to others. And because we are forgiven for our sins, we must forgive others for theirs. It's a very beautiful sentiment if it were in a vacuum, if all of us were equal, if all sins are equal. And I know that many people, many Christians say that all sins are equal in the eyes of God. And while that may be true for God, it certainly is not true in terms of the impact on human beings and human bodies.

[07:40] So I'm thinking about how forgiveness is used as a tool of control, how it keeps victims silent and keeps institutions protected. I'm thinking about how when we are taught that it is our job as Christians, our moral duty to forgive others who have harmed us without any consideration for the depth of the impact, the harm, the violence, how it puts the burden on the victim. The victim then becomes the center of being judged for her or his or their moral and spiritual maturity.

[08:33] It's the wrong kind of attention on the victim. Rather than centering their healing and their wholeness, it makes it so that we as victims or survivors are supposed to not have anger or resentment. We're not supposed to feel grief or rage. These are very normal responses to violence, to harm of many kinds. But we're made to feel or we're told directly that we are spiritually immature if we express that kind of rage and anger within many church families and communities. It's the burden on the victim to forgive 70 times 7, to ignore what the depth of harm that was caused because we're all centers and equal in the eyes of God.

[09:27] And what often happens is that it shifts the harmed party from the victim themselves to God. I remember as a kid, you know, you would hear a parent say or an adult say, you know, so and so tell your sister you're sorry for hitting her. There was this understanding of you had to apologize to the

person to whom you would cause the harm. If you had taken someone's toy, you had to give them back the toy and you had to apologize.

[09:59] In that very simple kindergarten understanding, that changed as I grew older in the church. And I wonder if it changed for you too. Instead of the victim hearing directly from the person who caused the harm, rather than it being focused on what restitution looked like or public accountability looked like, it became God who was the aggrieved party. It made God be the one to whom we had to ask forgiveness. So if I have done harm in the world, I pray to God admitting that I'm sin.

[10:41] I have sinned and I am a sinner repenting. And from there I receive salvation. But nowhere in that formula do we have to go make restitution or apologize or try to heal that which we have caused harm. It's really interesting because even as a six year old when I prayed the prayer of salvation, I was led to believe that I was a great sinner as a six year old. And therefore as a sinner I deserve to go to hell and it was only through the grace of God that my sins were forgiven.

[11:24] When I think back about that now, that troubles me. It changes again the orientation of who is the aggrieved party. And when it is God whose honor has been offended by our sin, even if that sin is causing harm to others, we're entering into this kind of theology that comes out of a feudal lords and ladies kind of system in which the honor of the Lord or the king or the feudal lord of a certain area, that that person's dignity and honor has been offended whenever anything wrong has occurred within their territory, within their reign.

[12:15] And in this kind of theology, that's why we have to ask God for forgiveness. That's why we deserve death because we have offended God's honor. And that for me is problematic because we're not centering the victim. We're not centering the survivor and they are not the ones who receive the restitution spiritually. We are required to do that on our own. I agree entirely that forgiveness is something that's important in our personal journeys because it helps us let go of the burden that we carry.

[13:02] I deeply believe that whatever it is that we feed, that's what grows. So if we feed our narratives of vengeance, of hatred, of being stuck in the thing that was done to us in a way that doesn't allow us to live into our fullness and doesn't allow us to heal as spiritual and physical beings, then yes, that's a problem. That's something that we work on, but we work on it deeply personally between us and God, between us and our therapist, between our ancestors and our spirits.

[13:39] We work on setting that burden down because it is a very heavy one. That's a very different kind of forgiveness than the kind of public display of forgiving others if they have caused harm without them repenting, without them admitting guilt, without there being any kind of restitution or accountability at all. I was thinking about how the mainstream narratives around forgiveness and Christianity come up, and I found this resource from an author from Focus on the Family, and he has these four principles of peacemaking that are based on forgiveness and what forgiveness means within Christianity according to Focus on the Family.

[14:30] And they're deeply troubling when we think about what is happening to survivors and victims right now when things are coming to light of how deep the harm has gone and how many

lives it has ruined. The four are, well, I'll just take them one at a time. The first one is a commitment, a promise that I will not dwell on it. If I have forgiven someone, I will not dwell on it, on whatever it was that happened. And for those of us who have trauma, sometimes those moments, those experiences are stuck, and we replay them again and again.

[15:16] It's something that requires help and time to heal from, and the very idea that you haven't truly forgiven or that you are measured on how you are doing by whether or not you dwell on it immediately causes so much self-incrimination and self-chastisement and punishment, if that's the first rule. The second one is I will not use it against you. That goes a little bit with the third one, which is I will not talk to others about it. And this is where abuse or violence, harm gets turned into gossip because we shouldn't be tattling or we shouldn't be creating friction, especially within the church for men of God or for those in power.

[16:13] And the idea that I can't talk about it, not to anyone, that I can't use it against you, as in if there is some harm that has been caused that I shouldn't go to the law, I shouldn't seek justice from the justice system. Those things, again, pit a victim against their own best interest, against their own healing sometimes. And the last one is I won't let it hinder our relationship. This very much leads back to what many of us were taught.

[16:49] I know, for example, I had a father who never completed his promises, and I would get so mad as a child. And I can just remember all the women in my family saying, well, he's your father. You have to forgive him. And I don't think that I ever really did. It didn't make sense to me why I couldn't be mad or disappointed, why I had to continue to let that experience happen over and over again because it was my responsibility to forgive over and over and over again.

[17:25] I think it's important for us to recognize when we put the burden of solving the problem, whatever the problem may be, on the victim, on the one who's experienced the harm. And I think we have to really recognize the embedded white Christian supremacy in the narrative that we have to ask God for forgiveness even if it's someone else we harmed. Because so many of those who have experienced abuse and sexual violence are socialized as girls and women. When we center on the forgiveness part, and that is the public performance, when it is the victim who has to apologize to the church because she got pregnant or because she quote unquote caused a man of God to fall because of supposedly what she was wearing

[18:24] or how she was behaving, even children like this young woman that I met in Costa Rica. It's important to recognize that we are saying to them that feelings that are completely normal like anger, rage, resentment, and especially grief that is not linear and doesn't happen just once. Those are normal responses. Those are normal emotions when someone has caused you harm or injury. And it doesn't speak to your sexual sin if you were a victim of sexual abuse or assault. It doesn't speak to your spiritual immaturity if you're not ready to forgive or if the way that you go about forgiveness isn't a public declaration of forgiveness in the media or in a courtroom or even within your own family.

[19:23] It's okay for that to take time. It's okay for that to not be anybody else's business but your own. And it is deeply problematic when we transfer the harmed party from the person who actually experienced the harm to a God that for so many is imagined as a white, cisgendered, able-bodied

man. Of course, it's easier to say you're sorry to God or to Jesus when you have an image of him as a man made of your own image or as a father and an omnipotent being.

[20:05] It's harder to look into the eyes of someone you have caused harm to and ask for forgiveness and do the work of restoration. Sometimes that isn't even what the victim wants and we have to figure out how we make amends even if it isn't directly with the victim. But we shouldn't pretend like it's God who was harmed when there are real human beings and real human lives who have suffered at the hands of others. For those of you who have a hard time forgiving, I offer you this nugget.

[20:40] When I think about forgiveness, particularly in the way of white Christian supremacy, I often think of it in the words of Jesus on the cross. In Luke 23, verse 34, where he says, Father, forgive them for they knew not what they do. In my mind, I have this image of Jesus in kind of a comic form that helps me feel okay when I need to feel my feelings around being harmed. And I imagine Jesus saying to God, Father, forgive them because I sure as hell won't.

[21:28] That feeling of I don't have it in me. I'm not capable of doing that, so I need you to do it. If you forgive them, then you can do it. I can't, because sometimes it shouldn't be on us to do the forgiving. It shouldn't be our responsibility, and we shouldn't be judged of our moral and spiritual maturity and character based on how we respond to being harmed by others, especially in the situations that we're hearing about now more and more. So take heart.

[22:09] It's okay. There's not just one way to forgive. Will you pray with me? God of tenderness who holds us close and delicately, help us to feel your tenderness. Help us to know that you are capable of things that we are not capable of, that we are allowed to be in the fullness of who we are, of how we feel, that grief and anger are a part of life, are part of lived experiences, especially when we've experienced harm and hurt. Give us the space to grieve when we need it.

[23:07] Give us the community to remind us who we are and whose we are when bad things happen. Help us to undo the narratives of white Christian supremacy that have told us that it is on us alone to offer forgiveness when there is harm. Help us hold the complexity and the vastness of the feeling of the possibility. Be with us in the quiet moments where we're trying to do the work of healing. Be with us on the journey as we move from one place to another to heal what has happened, to become a new version of what could be.

[23:56] Within the theological principles and doctrines and church traditions that you've given us that are such a blessing, help us weed out those which cause harm. Those which place undue burden on others that doesn't belong there. Let us be reminded that you love us, that we are supported by community, that we are never alone, and that we are always already sacred. Amen. Thank you for spending a little bit of your day with me and love letters from Rev. Sex. I'm your host, Rev. Alba Onofrio, a.k.a. Rev. Sex, and I'm the Executive Director and Spiritual Strategist here at Soulforce, the org that sponsors this podcast.

[24:47] I want to make sure you also know about our Monday show called Shameless Theology, where we talk to queer, trans, and feminist theologians, faith activists, and Christian clergy from a Latina lens. We talk about things like religion, family, sexuality, identity, and home. It's a space

where we shamelessly tell the truth to both decolonize our own faith and also amplify the voices of some of the brilliant faith work happening for social justice. This season, we're focusing on the concepts from our new book called *Spiritual Violence, Religious Phenomena That Defile the Faith*.

[25:20] So check out our weekly conversations on Shameless Theology podcast and download our new book on our website at soulforce.org. I hope you've enjoyed this episode of Love Letters from Rev. Sex. If someone you love came to mind during this episode, consider forwarding it as a love letter of your own. Until next time, may your heart be ablaze with purpose and love, and may your spirit forever know that you are precious and beautiful and fiercely loved. We'll talk again soon.