



# Dance: Dance and Forgiveness

## What if dance expanded students' ideas of forgiveness?

James's class dynamics had been affected by recurring problems in friendship groups. He decided to approach this indirectly through dance.

"I wanted to expand how the class thought about forgiveness, so we started with American Sign Language for some key words: *sorry* (repentance), *forgiveness*, and *change*. We discussed what the signs expressed about repentance, forgiveness, and change. I demonstrated how signs could be extended using the whole body.

"I introduced some paraphrased material from the Bible as a stimulus, and we discussed what the words and images meant and how we could learn from them about forgiving others. We talked about how repentance is more than being sorry: it is a change in direction in life, a change of action and attitude:

- Repent and turn away from wrong so that it will not ruin your life.
- God has put our sins at the bottom of the sea.
- God has put our sins as far away as east is from west.
- God covers our sin and wipes it away.
- Change your ways and your actions and deal with each other fairly.

"We looked at the verbs and the images in the biblical material and translated them into movements. Then the students created a dance sequence that was a mix of both extended ASL signs and movements that expressed some of their understanding of the key words. For example, repentance became an extended ASL sign while the dancer changed direction.

"The class thought about how they might use signs in relationships when they needed forgiveness or needed to forgive others. Stopping to make the sign could give them time to think about choosing how to act in a situation. I also suggested they create their own

sign that could sum up a longer sentence such as ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.’”

## What’s going on here?

James **saw** his dance lesson as a place for helping his class toward better relationships through learning about forgiveness.

He **engaged** his class by focusing their attention on the key ideas of repentance, forgiveness, and change, and he invited them to reflect and act on their choices of behaviour. James expanded the experience of his students through his use of dance and sign language together.

James **reshaped his practice** by making connections between faith and everyday life in his use of the Bible in dance. He gave the lesson a framework of biblical concepts (repentance, forgiveness, and change), and he gave it a strong personal element by linking it to student relationships.

## What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Forgiveness is an aspect of **love**, for it refuses to let sin have the last word. Forgiveness, like love, is not just a feeling; it can be a commitment to behave in a certain way regardless of what is felt. Forgiveness fully acknowledges wrong without pretending it does not matter, but it also lays down any right to revenge. Repentance, forgiveness, and change signal hope, for they do not lock the wrong-doer in the past, and they release the one wronged from bitterness.

## What difference does it make?

We live in a time when “getting back” (revenge) is becoming increasingly part of our culture. To think in terms of forgiveness is to swim against the tide, for forgiving often is seen as weak; thankfully, some high profile examples have challenged that.

## Where could we go from here?

Other key concepts, such as grace, mercy, and hope, could be explored through dance and drama so that students learn through both their bodies and their minds.

## Digging deeper

A University of Pittsburgh study of 680 women with chest pain found that those who harbored feelings of anger were four times more likely to have unhealthy cholesterol levels and a higher body mass index, both of which are linked to heart disease. Forgiveness is good for our health.

Forgiving others is one of the most difficult aspects of Christian practice. It is not surprising that the poet Alexander Pope wrote, "To err is human; to forgive, divine." Forgiveness is ceasing to feel resentment toward an enemy, but that does not mean that evil is allowed to continue; sometimes justice and making amends still need to happen. Forgiveness often is the first step toward reconciliation in a relationship. For Christians, forgiveness is a response to being forgiven by God and was modeled by Christ, who forgave his enemies (Luke 23:24) and offers forgiveness to all who come to him. Asking God for forgiveness should result in our forgiveness of others (Matthew 6:14-15; Colossians 3:13). Forgiveness is not just a feeling; it can be an act of will.

*Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. Corrie Ten Boom*

Forgiveness only happens with the help of God, but it benefits both the injured person and the one forgiven. However difficult, forgiveness is crucial, for we who forgive also need forgiving.

*To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. Lewis B. Smedes*

*He who cannot forgive others destroys the bridge over which he himself must pass. George Herbert*

The Bible portrays God as slow to anger but quick to forgive, since mercy is central to his character (Micah 7:18). Various word pictures are used for forgiveness in the Bible. Psalms 103:12 talks about God putting our sins as far away as the east is from the west. Isaiah 1:18 likens forgiveness to removing a stain. One of the New Testament words for forgiveness means cancelling a debt.

Repentance is a change not only in feeling but also in a way of life (Zechariah 1:4), so the English word sorry captures only half of the meaning. Repentance is a complete change of direction and sometimes is indicated by a physical change of direction (as in the case of the prodigal son who returned home).