Myisha Cherry: Failures of Forgiveness

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Funk and Flash]

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

If you were asked to define forgiveness, what would you say? My answer would be pretty vague–something along the lines of forgiveness means letting the past go and letting go of anger. My guest today, philosopher Mysiha Cherry, argues that forgiveness is actually a much more multifaceted concept.

Myisha Cherry: I'm trying to challenge the reader to broaden the way in which they think about forgiveness, that forgiveness can include attitudinal change, so I could change my attitude towards you…It could include an affective or emotional change…It could include a kind of a behavioral change…It could include a whole variety of aims, not just reconciliation…And so there's a variety of aims that we haven't taken into account or that we tend not to take into account. And there's a variety of moral practices that can count as forgiveness.

Christiane: We'll discuss all of this and much more on this episode of Examining Ethics.

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[interview begins]

Christiane: Welcome to the show, Myisha Cherry. We're here to talk about your new book, *Failures of Forgiveness*. So just briefly, lay out your project here.

Myisha Cherry: So someone might read the title and think that what I'm suggesting is that forgiveness is a failure, right? That forgiveness as a way to kind of recover in the aftermath of wrongdoing–it's just not something that we should do. Instead, my thesis is kind of the opposite, right? That I wanna say that it's us as agents that when we engage in the process of forgiveness, whether that is as a forgiver, or whether that is as a wrongdoer seeking forgiveness, whether that is as a third party wanting forgiveness, that we sometimes fail. And so we end up failing forgiveness as a whole.

So the challenge of the book is to make sure that we do better. And I think a lot of it begins with the way in which we think about forgiveness and trying to challenge us that if we

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rethink forgiveness, that's gonna affect our expectations of forgiveness and that's going to affect how we practice forgiveness in our day-to-day lives in those particular roles.

Christiane: Map out for us how forgiveness is commonly understood, like what's most people's understanding of forgiveness, and how that differs from your own very particular definition of forgiveness.

Myisha Cherry: So, I think typically people think of forgiveness in a narrow way. And it's not a wrong way, it's just narrow. So typically if you ask anyone what forgiveness is, they're probably gonna suggest that forgiveness is “a letting go of anger.” It's the letting go of any hard feelings that we have towards the wrongdoer.

And then another kind of common view about forgiveness is that it tends to aim towards reconciliation. And even how we conceive of reconciliation is also quite narrow, right? Reconciliation is riding off into the sunset together with each other as if you know, it's all good going forward. And I wanna suggest that it could be those things. There's instances in which forgiveness does entail the letting go of these particular hard feelings and it could get us the goal of reconciling in the particular way that I describe.

But I wanna suggest that's not always the case, right? And so I'm trying to challenge the reader to broaden the way in which they think about forgiveness: that forgiveness can include what I describe as kind of an attitudinal change–so I could change my attitude towards you. It could include affective or emotional change–so I could let go of my anger. It could include a behavioral change–I decide that I'm gonna change the way in which I treat you in a particular way, whether that's refraining from revenge or any kind of attitude or activity.

And it could include a whole variety of aims, not just reconciliation, but it could just aim for repair for myself or release or relief for the wrongdoer. And so there's a variety of aims that we haven’t taken into account or that we tend not to take into account. And there's a variety of moral practices that can count as forgiveness. And I think the worry for me is that when we conceive of forgiveness in the narrow way that I just just described, we don't accept people's forgiveness as such because it looks different. And so I wanna challenge us to kind of broaden our view about what forgiveness is.

Christiane: Yeah, that's one of the things I loved about this book is that… I thought I had an expansive view on forgiveness, but it expanded my view on forgiveness and it made me realize the extent to which I'd been told…I mean, I grew up in a Christian culture, the

extent to which I'd been told basically you have to forgive people when they hurt you. So I wondered, first of all, is it ok to withhold forgiveness? Is it ok to just say like, not me?

Myisha Cherry: So it's interesting here. So as much as I'm trying to get us to broaden the way in which we think about forgiveness, I'm also trying to get us to broaden the way in which we think about what recovery looks like in the aftermath of wrongdoing.

In some instances, forgiveness is a pathway going forward, right? It's a pathway going forward, in relationship to the relationship. It could be a path going forward in relationship to how you deal with yourself and how the wrongdoer deals with themselves and everybody else. But it's not the only way to recover from wrongdoing and just because a person refrains from forgiveness, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're gonna like just decide to just raise hell in the family or in the relationship or stalk and seek revenge on behalf of the wrongdoer.

So I wanna say because that is the case, I believe that could be the case that it's ok to withhold forgiveness. And there's a variety of reasons why a person will withhold forgiveness, right? It could be that they're, they're just not ready to forgive and that's ok. Also you know people who do decide to forgive, it's a process so they may not forgive in that moment, but they may just decide, hey, I'm not ready to let it go.

The wrongdoing was to a certain degree that I can't let go of the anger or, the wrongdoer just did me wrong so much. I can't right now let go of the hatred. And so I need to sit with this and then perhaps, maybe soon or maybe never, I will be able to let it go. And all this is contextual, right? It depends on the nature of the wrongdoing, the relationship, the person, et cetera, et cetera.

So there's a variety of reasons, right? It could be the case that the wrongdoer is not apologetic. It could be the case that no one believes the victim, right? And so there's a variety of factors that can influence a person's decision or strength or capacity to forgive. And I wanna say that that's okay. We can still recover from wrongdoing. But we need to stop thinking that forgiveness is always the way and those who do not forgive, they're trying to get in the way of repair or reconciliation. And I wanna say that that's not the case.

Christiane: I read a lot of ethics books for this show. Obviously, I read a lot of philosophy for this show and I'm not a philosopher. And one of the things that's so frustrating to me about ethics books is that the writer often says, “I'm not providing prescriptions, I'm not providing suggestions for behavior.” *You have suggestions for behavior* throughout your

book and I love that. Have you received any pushback on making those suggestions from the philosophy community?

Myisha Cherry: I have not. A lot of this was primarily influenced from the reception that I got from my previous book, *The Case For Rage* and what a lot of people were surprised by, but applauded me on, is that in the last couple of chapters of that book, I offer up anger-management tools. And so it is a prescription, right? It tells people what they can do and how they can do it, right? If philosophy is committed to responding to our everyday problems and trying to pull from philosophical resources to make sure that our well-being is taken care of, it's not enough just to analyze the thing, right?

And it's not just enough to provide principles for things. We gotta find out how we can enact those principles in our day to day life. Now, mind you context is gonna be dependent, but I think we can go a step further. And so when I was thinking about this particular book, the kind of inspiration to even write about a book about forgiveness, was not to kind of make an intervention in the philosophical literature. It was to make an intervention in our lives as human beings, right? I was seeing how the discourse was narrow, I was seeing how the problems that were being created in the aftermath of wrongdoing was a problem that had a lot to do in the ways in which we were conceiving of and acting from forgiveness. And so I felt that it was important to make that kind of intervention and that intervention requires a way forward, a way out of that narrow way of thinking, that narrow way of doing and the problems that were arising as such.

And so that required not only just principles but suggestions on how to do better. And so I'm not making an academic intervention. I'm making a wellness intervention. I'm making a relationship intervention, I'm making a conflict intervention and that requires suggestions on how we can do much better than we have done. So even if I did receive pushback, and I'm pretty sure there's probably perhaps some silent pushback. I don't care. Because the whole purpose of the book is to make sure that we not only rethink it, but when we do some stuff and do different things than we have already done and that requires a way forward.

Christiane: Can you give me an example? I mean, again, you're, you're broadening the definition. So it might be hard to give an example here. But could you maybe give me an example of an expanded view or how you want forgiveness to look different for some people?

Myisha Cherry: So if you go back to the original explanation that I gave about how people typically think that it's a letting go of anger, right? And it has one particular goal. They're

not wrong. That's just a narrow way of thinking, all right. And so in one instance, it could be the case that if we have a falling out and I'm angry towards you and I'm carrying this anger around, I decide, hey, I wanna forgive you because I would like for us to continue being friends, then that process is going to be, hey, I gotta let go of this anger and with the ultimate aim–we may not reach it–with the ultimate aim of us going back to the way things were right, or at least trying to be friends again.

That's one instance in a way in which forgiveness can look, but like I said before, if that forgiveness is not just emotional, affective and it doesn't just aim towards reconciliation, it can be behavioral. So it may be the case that I decide, you know what, I'm gonna hold on to this anger, but I do have this desire to seek revenge on you. So what I'm gonna do, what my forgiveness is gonna look like: I'm just gonna refrain from doing any kind of retaliatory kind of action towards you. And I'm not gonna do it with the aim of reconciling with you because I don't wanna be friends with you anymore. I'm gonna do it as a way to kind of repair myself from the feelings that I have about the wrongdoing that has occurred. I just wanna feel better. I wanna be better.

So if, if you know this, there's a kind of formula here, there's a particular practice which can be affective or behavioral and it's going towards a particular aim, it could be reconciliation, it could be repair, it could be relief, it could be release, right? So there's a variety of things that we can do, that we can change, that we can feel, that can count and there's a variety of goals that we can achieve and you put that combination together, which is the practice plus the aim and you will have–let me just say the moral practice plus the aim–and you will have forgiveness. So those are just examples that I'm imagining.

And here's another example that perhaps hasn't really been taken up as serious. It also kind of includes what I call kind of ritualistic practices. So it could be the case that given our relationship, we may not apologize to each other, you know, get all sentimental. It could be the case that there's something that we do to let us both know that we're all good, right? So it could be, it could be that I just decided to just, you know, give you our private handshake or I just decided to get we hug it out and then we decide, hey, let's continue to be friends. So I wanna take into account ritualistic behaviors that we engage in, too. So it's much more expansive than just all about your feelings.

And I think a lot of us have just focused on the feeling part and focus on the highest ultimate goal, reconciliation, which is a goal that a lot of people don't reach and I would even say shouldn't be a goal for all instances of conflict. It may be the case that you shouldn't reconcile with a wrongdoer for reasons of safety, or reasons of dignity, right? So that's what

I mean by the expansive account. It includes more than just stuff that we do with our emotions and it aims towards more than just kind of perfect reconciliation.

Christiane: That was another thing I so appreciated about your book is that one of my frustrations with forgiveness is like so much pressure is on the person doing the forgiving to do the right thing. And you have suggestions for people who are in need of forgiveness or who are asking forgiveness and how they should approach the situation. And so one of the things you write about that we need to be careful about is something you call the hurry and bury ritual. So what is that?

Myisha Cherry: Yeah, the hurry and bury ritual–so this was a ritual that I witnessed after 2012, Trayvon Martin was murdered, and there were several high profile cases of police violence against black folk that ended in their death. And you notice that there would be press conferences, whether that's before the indictment or at the indictment or before there was no indictment. And I noticed that reporters were constantly asking one question to the surviving family members of these victims. And they will ask, “Can you find it in your heart to forgive?” Now, mind you a lot of these requests were being made when they haven't even buried their son. It was being made before an indictment was even done. So it was something that was happening very, very, very, very quickly. It was something that was happening very, very, very public.

It was directed towards women, it was directed towards black women. It was directed in a context of state violence. And in some ways, it made me think about our tendency to want to kind of get to that perfect Hollywood ending real quickly without any considerations about what we're doing and how that can be putting more harm and more burdens on victims. So it's called “hurry” because you're asking someone to forgive quite quickly and it's called “bury” because you, whether it's implicitly or explicit, so whether you intend to do it or it could be easily interpreted as you're doing it, asking that question as a way to kind of bury the wrongdoing to not necessarily focus on the atrocity, the wrongdoing that was happening and just trying to quickly kind of create a narrative of all is well, all is good and I call it the hurry and bury ritual and it doesn't just happen in the case of those, those high profile cases of police brutality, right? It can happen in our families.

Thanksgiving is coming, so you may reach out to a family member who was like “I know there was beef last Thanksgiving. Can you like, you know, make sure there's no problems now. Can you just let it go for Uncle Henry so that we…” So that’s what I mean by the hurry ritual. We do it whether that's in our role as journalists trying to create a good story or trying to mend things as third parties or trying to be that person to kind of extend the olive branch.

And I'm trying to suggest that we be very careful asking for forgiveness, asking about forgiveness could be proper. It could be the right thing to do depending on the context, but we need to make sure that we don't rush victims and that we don't rush victims to forgive so that we can kind of create a perfect story or a perfect or comfortable environment just for ourselves without any considerations about how victims feel and the long process that it takes to truly recover, recover from wrongdoing, which is something that the victim cannot do alone.

Christiane: You mentioned that in a lot of these high profile stories where people are being asked to forgive or asked whether they're going to forgive. There seems to be a through line which is that a lot of them are women, a lot of them are black women, a lot of people who are asked to forgive are often people of color. So I wondered if you could speak to that a little bit.

Myisha Cherry: I think the reality of that kind of reminds us that forgiveness is not just a moral practice, it's not just a response that we have to wrongdoing, but even the way that we conceive of forgiveness is very much racialized and very much gendered, right?

So what do I mean by that? It suggests that who we forgive, what we forgive, and when we feel that it's time to forgive is very much influenced by racial and gender dynamics, right? Here's some examples that should come across your mind, a public figure, let's call him a male, a male public figure has committed a wrongdoing and he has a wife and we typically see scenes of the wife holding his hand being like the long-suffering, enduring wife, who forgave them during these kind of high profile cases, the husband is saying, “I thank my wife for her forgiveness and for her support.” And if she did not forgive, you can imagine how people would be in the comment section saying he she's not standing by her man, right? Which goes to show, I mean if you flip it, we might say that, hey, he's stupid for sticking with her, that kind of thing.

And that's just a reminder that who we forgive is very gendered, right? Who we think is worthy of forgiveness is very gendered and who we think should really engage in the hard work of forgiveness is very much gendered. We think individuals who are worthy of forgiveness are typically men, particularly white men, right? So you think about the indiscretions of youth, right? A black man: “Arrest him, put him in jail for the rest of his life.” And then you have something like the Kavanaugh case that suggests: “Hey, he was just in college, he was just a young, he was just a boy. It's just these indiscretions that happen.”

We see this–Kate Manne calls this “himpathy,” we see this time and time again because we think that only certain people who have value and have worth are worthy of forgiveness,

right? And it's not always extended on the other end. And it's usually people who are oppressed that we kind of put the commandment and and put the obligation and the burden that they should forgive, making it their responsibility to do the work on repair, which like I said before obscures wrongdoing.

So we say let's not focus on the wrongdoing. Let's just print how black people forgave this person, right? Let's not focus on what we need to do more of going forward because everything is all said and done. Everything is, well, everything is good in the hood because a black person forgave a police officer–racism has ended. And so that's what I mean by forgiveness being gendered and being racialized.

And what we need to do is be cognizant when we begin to look at forgiveness through that particular lens, right? And it's hard, right? We live in a society that's very much racialized, very much gendered, misogyny, racism, et cetera, et cetera. I think what we should do is accept the challenge of rethinking forgiveness. And what I'm trying to do in the book is to get us to think about what forgiveness is, but also take away this racial lens that we have to kind of change who we think is worthy and who we think needs forgiving and who we think needs to engage in that particular process.

Because as long as we look at forgiveness through a racialized lens, through a gender lens, then repair would never be achieved. We would just get superficial repair, we would not get radical repair. As long as we look at forgiveness through a racialized lens and through a gender lens, we're just gonna put more burden on those who are marginalized in our community.

So the challenge is up to us, not to them. The challenge is up to us. To change the way we think about forgiveness, which requires for us to change, to think about who is worthy of forgiveness and who needs to extend forgiveness.

Christiane: So one of the, one of the chapters that I found most interesting was the one where you talk about cancel culture and forgiveness. And I don't, I don't know why, but I didn't think of those things together. So you argue that cancel culture can be compatible with forgiveness. So how does that work?

Myisha Cherry: So I think that cancel culture can coexist with forgiveness for the following reasons, right? So what would make you cancel a particular celebrity? A celebrity is someone that you don't have a personal relationship with. You have what I describe as a transactional relationship, right?

Their job and their relationship is to provide entertainment and what you do in advance is that you support them, whether that's through going to their YouTube page or buying their particular product. I mean, that's the extent of the relationship. And for any reason you can decide to get out of that relationship. Reasons could be that you're not interested and then you don't think they're talented anymore. You don't like what they're producing or it could be for moral reasons, right?

Perhaps that person sexually assaulted somebody, perhaps that person is just mean, right? So there could be a variety of reasons why you would decide to cancel them. And I wanna suggest that based on the transactional relationship and the reasons why we would cancel our transactional relationship. I mean, there's nothing wrong about that, right? We can cancel any transactional relationship, we can without there being moral problems. So when I talk about canceling, that's what I'm referring to: a cancellation of a transactional relationship that you have with a celebrity and you do it for a variety of reasons. And one of those reasons could be because they committed a wrongdoing or something of that particular nature.

Now say, for instance, they did indeed commit a moral infraction and I decided I no longer want to support them. So we call “canceling.” Now I can still decide to forgive them for what they did, but I could also still decide I still don't want to support them. And I use an example of John Mayer–something that happened years and years ago. And as a result, I kind of stopped having a transactional relationship with him. But I forgave him. (Whatever that could look like on behalf of me and a celebrity.)

And so because I was able to see that in my own life, I was able to recognize that forgiveness could be compatible with canceling, right? Just like deciding not to reconcile with someone could be also compatible with forgiveness. You just had a different goal and that goal wasn't, wasn't reconciliation.

So people have a tendency to think, “Hey, all this canceling that's happening. You know, it's the antithesis of forgiveness. What we need to have is mercy, what we need to have is forgiveness.” I wanna say no, you can still cancel these celebrities, given the transactional relationship. You can do whatever you wanna do with your money and your attention and you can still decide to forgive them.

What I'm not talking about, is I'm not talking about the misuses of canceling, right? And those are more problems within themselves. And I think that's an easy case. It's an easy thing to attack the misuses of what we call canceling and the abuses of what we call

canceling. But I'm talking about canceling this in this kind of pure sense, right? Forgiveness can be compatible with, with canceling in that regard.

There's another question about people suggesting that hey, we need to stop canceling people, we need to stop having to cancel culture–which I kind of deny that there's a such thing. And we need to replace that with a forgiveness culture. And I deny that move as well, right? Because when I consider anything such as culture, for example, when I think about culture, I think about and particularly, thinking about online culture. Online culture means hey, we're just gonna cancel people without looking at the evidence or hey, we're just gonna cancel people and do like a pile-on for example, do what everybody else is doing, right?

I look at forgiveness culture as the same thing, right? Forgiveness culture, where we're just gonna forgive without having any moral reasons to forgive or we're just gonna forgive because everybody else is forgiving. I don't want any of those as a culture. I think my primary point is that canceling is cool and it's compatible with forgiveness. And I don't want canceling to be replaced by forgiveness culture or mercy culture because they will suffer from the same problems that we have when anything is made into a culture. And that's not to say that we should not forgive. It's not to say that we shouldn't extend mercy. But I don't want a mercy culture and I don't want a forgiveness culture either just like I don't want a “cancel culture.”

Christiane: If I were listening to this without having read your book, I would be maybe thinking like, well, what's wrong with the forgiveness culture? So what is wrong with forgiveness culture?

Myisha Cherry: I don't want forgiveness culture because I believe that forgiveness is not always a solution to our problems, right? Primarily because it's not always possible to achieve forgiveness. And as we're talking about this, it seems like forgiveness is always something that victims do. And I think that to recover from wrongdoing is not something that only victims should participate in, right?

I also don't think that forgiveness should be a culture because when it becomes a culture, it's like, hey, forgive for any reason. So it doesn't require anything from the wrongdoer, right? It may not require an apology. It's just something that we're gonna do because this is something that we should do, right? It doesn't require any buy in from the community, right? Someone can be pressured into forgiveness and forgive quite quickly, right? I don't want it as a culture, right?

I want it as something that a victim decides to engage in for their own personal reasons. That's very different from a culture, right? Not because all these people are telling them to do it right. It's something that they they're going to engage in because they think that this is a way towards the goals that I just suggested that goes towards repair, the goals towards reconciliation, the goals towards relief or release and any time they feel like forgiveness is not gonna get them there, then they shouldn't engage in it. They can engage in a whole bunch of stuff that can give them those particular goals, right?

I don't have this kind of Hollywood thinking about forgiveness so much so that I think forgiveness should become a culture, right? And I think sometimes when we get so hung up on forgiveness being the solution, so that therefore, we need to create a forgiveness culture, we obscure wrongdoing, we deny that anybody besides the victim has a role to play and have things to do in order for things to go back to the way they were or for things to go or for the future to be better, right?

It suggests that there's no responsibilities on behalf of community members or a nation-state or other family members. I don't want that as a culture.

And what we find out is that when we view forgiveness in that particular light, it fails, as the title of my book suggests, it fails. So that should be a kind of a signal to us, a sign to us that the way we're thinking about it as a culture is not the way that we should think about forgiveness. And so I'm, I'm trying to challenge us in that, with that, in that kind of thinking and trying to get us to change our mindset.

It would be wonderful if there was one solution to all of our problems. If recovering from wrongdoing was like a math equation, it would be beautiful. That would be wonderful. I would read all the books about it. I would take pictures and do viral videos about it. But that's, I'm sorry, that's not life. Life is messy. Recovering after wrongdoing doesn't always look the way that we want it to look. And we need to sit in the messiness of life and particularly the life that we have created and deal with it as such, right?

And there's a variety of solutions. And here's the thing about the messiness of life, we can try all those solutions and we probably don't even, we probably never get back to the way things were. That's life. So I wanna dispel this belief that forgiveness is the answer. It's not the answer.

Christiane: Towards the end of your book, you write that we need to expand our definition of forgiveness to include something you call radical repair. What is radical repair?

Myisha Cherry: So radical repair is trying to imagine, how do we recover from wrongdoing and what would that look like? What do victims need? What do third parties want? What do we want the future to look like? And I wanna suggest that to get us to that future, to get us to that desire, requires work and that work is a radical kind of work.

So when I think about radical, I'm inspired by Martin Luther King and suffragists, right? You think about the kind of radical actions that they engaged in–so it's unconventional actions, it's collaborative actions. It requires teamwork, it requires creativity. It requires getting at the root of a problem. And I wanna say the combination of that, which is I want to contrast that with something that I call superficial repair–the kind of repair where you try to fix things so it can just look good from the outside. But the situation is not really taken care of. That's not radical repair. Radical repair gets to the root, right? It's quite different from the kind of repair that we've been talking about in which victims do all the work. No, radical repair says, "hey, I'm not gonna leave it all on the victim to restore things. There's a part that I have to play too, whether that's as a friend, whether that's as a wrongdoer, whether that's as a family member, whether that's as a politician, there's something that I can do because it requires collaboration and teamwork."

Radical repair says what worked to heal relationships in the past may not be what's required for today. So I gotta be creative. I gotta think about the context, I gotta think about the individuals, right? And I wanna say that that kind of labor, that kind of work, that kind of mindset is the thing that's gonna allow us to truly recover from wrongdoing and absent of that, we may have repair, but it's superficial, we may have repair, but it's just thrifty because radical repair requires not only work, it requires investment, it requires a variety of tools. It requires risk, it requires a cost.

And the question is, are we willing to engage in that to get us towards a better future?

[Interview ends] **[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Rambling]**

Christiane: If you want to find more about Myisha Cherry's other work, download a transcript, or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode visit prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics.

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