

Here is a sentence that is instantly recognizable. We say it, or some variation of it, every time we gather for worship: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

When you pray those words a little later during our worship service this morning, what will you be thinking about? What is there in your life for which you need to be forgiven? For what things done, or left undone, do you need to be forgiven? I am sure there is something that all of us have done, or left undone, for which we need forgiveness. Also, who still awaits your forgiveness? What has another person done, or left undone to you, that you have yet to forgive?

We just heard the parable of the prodigal son. Sometimes it is referred to as the parable of the loving father. Whatever you call it, it has been described as one of the greatest stories in all of literature. It is also for me the most difficult passage in all of scripture, because I know that the prodigal son does not always return.

Scripture always speaks first and foremost about God, and only secondarily about us. The parable of the prodigal son is a story about God. A story about what God is like. A story about what God’s kingdom is like. It is the story about how God acts recklessly, you might even say wastefully, in seeking out and welcoming apparently worthless people.

It is the story of a father with two sons. The younger son is an irresponsible disgrace. The other son is a model of faithful diligence and respect. The younger son, for reasons we are not told, utters the ultimate insult: he demands to be given his share of his father’s inheritance. According to Jewish law at the time, a younger son was entitled to receive one-third of his father’s estate. But to make such a request while his father was still alive was an insult that went against family, religious, and social mores. In essence, the son said to his father, you are as good as dead to me.

Instead of taking offence and punishing the younger son, the father grants his request. The younger son, his pockets now stuffed with cash, runs towards the bright lights of a distant place where he promptly squanders his inheritance on dissolute living. When he runs out of money, the only way he can feed himself is by herding pigs, the most degrading occupation imaginable for a Jew at that time. He had left home to be free, to feast, to be merry, and he ended up enslaved, famished, miserable. It was only then that the younger brother, in the words of the gospel writer, “came to himself.” He recognizes the error of his ways, and he repents.

Have you ever had the experience of heading down a particular path in life, and then realizing the choices you are making just are not producing the results, the happiness, the sense of peace, that you want? And then you “came to yourself.” You chose a different path. A better way.

The younger son received just such a revelation. He “came to himself”, realizing that he was not yet totally lost. He still had a choice. He could return home, return to his father, ask to be taken back not as a son but as a hired field hand. He decided to repent and confess his sins against God and his father, and to turn homeward.

In the meantime, the father has been waiting and watching, desperately hoping for his youngest son’s safe return. There’s this great unforgettable image in the parable of the old father recognizing his returning son while he is still far off in the distance, and the father running to meet him, embracing and kissing him, and calling for the best clothing and food to be provided the son and for a magnificent celebration to be held.

The son had a carefully rehearsed confession and explanation for his disgraceful actions planned in hope of winning back his father’s favour, but the father does not wait to hear it. He does not chastise the boy. Does not ask him to explain how he plans to make up for all the heartache he has caused. Does not demand to know how the son intends to repay all the money he has squandered. Does not ask the son to explain how he can ever be trusted again. None of that matters to the father. All that matters is his son is home. The lost is found.

Deserving the worst, the boy receives the best. We enjoy this moment in the parable, don't we? We know that we are not witnessing justice taking place. It is something more. It is forgiveness, reconciliation, and giving beyond what a person deserves. We are witnessing God's grace at work.

But the story does not end there, does it? It begins to get complicated because there is a third character, the older son. He is not happy about his irresponsible kid brother's return and his father's unrestrained demonstration of generosity and acceptance towards the prodigal. When the older son objects, reminding his father how "all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends," the father did not disagree with or belittle him. He simply said, "Son you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

We understand the older brother's anger, don't we? Our innate sense of right and wrong tells us it is not fair that the good guy, the meritorious older son goes unrewarded, while the bad guy, the irresponsible younger son is celebrated.

I wonder why Jesus even includes the older brother in the parable, because he has already made his point that God's love is unconditional and reaches out to the sinner even before he repents. The appearance of the older brother in the story does not change that message, so why include him?

Perhaps it was Jesus' way of acknowledging that anger – our anger – is an understandable and very human reaction. Perhaps Jesus is acknowledging that being the dutiful child, being the dutiful Christian, as you well know, can be a burden at times that we cannot change but must accept and get on with life.

As with most of the parables Jesus told, the ending of this one is incomplete. We are not told if the father's forgiveness prevented the younger son from again straying down wrong paths in the future. We are not told if the older son ever "came to himself" and joined his father celebrating his younger brother's return. We are not told because the story ultimately is not about either of the sons, or about us – it is about God and God's unlimited capacity for forgiveness.

Sometimes I feel that we, myself included, have read the words of our confession and heard the assurance of our absolution, our forgiveness by God, so many times in our lives during worship services that they become just more words to be spoken without our absorbing fully the truly amazing exchange that those words represent. Because whenever we ask, with absolute honesty, that God forgive us, we are forgiven. We are forgiven, merely by asking, we are forgiven. God forgives us. Let that sink in. We are truly forgiven. It is amazing.

But forgiveness is a two-way street, isn't it? That's what we say in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our sins, our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass/who sin, against us." So easy to say; so difficult to do at times.

I have heard it said that real forgiveness does not mean letting the other person off the hook. Real forgiveness means eliminating the hook altogether. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting the harm that was done. Forgiveness does not mean that we do not feel the tragedy of betrayal or fear.

I have been told that there are several steps to forgiving. The first step is refusing to seek revenge and abandoning the "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" mentality that so easily grasps hold of us. Another step is a willingness to try to understand the one who has sinned against us, and to hope and pray that one day they will be changed for the better. Another step towards being able to forgive, is the honest recognition of our own darkness. The acknowledgement that we too, both intentionally and unintentionally, through our words and actions, have hurt, have sinned against other people. Yet another step is patience. Recognizing that forgiving is something much easier to talk about than to do. It takes time, it can take a lot of time, for wounds to heal enough for us to forgive.

I have sins that require God's forgiveness. I suspect that you do as well. And I have yet to forgive some who have sinned against me. Perhaps the same is true for you as well. But we know what we need to do. The parable of the prodigal son and the loving father shows us what we need to do. By God's grace we will have the wisdom and courage to do it.

Let's finish by listening to the words of Henri Nouwen who back in 1992 published a perfect little book entitled *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. Nouwen wrote, "For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life – pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures – and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair. Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know, and to love me. The question is not 'How am I to find God?' but 'How am I to let myself be found by God?' The question is not 'How am I to know God?' but 'How am I to let myself be known by God?' And, finally, the question is not 'How am I to love God?' but 'How am I to let myself be loved by God?' God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home."

I hope all of us can accept and remember Henri's words the next time we pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." **Amen.**

Fourth Sunday in Lent

27 March 2022

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