

Psalm 103:1-13 ~ Luke 15:11-32

Preaching on Your Good Questions: How Does Forgiveness Really Work? (3rd of 3)
14th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Service of Healing and Wholeness ~ August 25, 2024
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Have you ever attended a church service without hearing the word “forgive” in it? At any church, anywhere? I’m pretty sure you heard it at least once, probably more than once. Surely, forgiveness is central to our faith: Both God’s grace and mercy to us made known through Christ; and our call to extend that grace and mercy to others. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” There it is right in the middle of the Lord’s Prayer. On the evening of the morning of Jesus’ resurrection, when the Risen Christ appeared to the disciples in John 20:23, we see this, his first words after greeting them: “He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

It is no surprise that when those disciples turned Apostles and put together that very first creed, The Apostles’ Creed, the act of forgiveness was prime: “I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” The one “to do” in this list of beliefs: “the forgiveness of sins.” To this day, whenever we share the sacrament of Holy Communion whether at this Table, (which we will do next Sunday) or when doing home communion where we improvise the Table, using sometimes that amazing invention, the “rollator” (like Gerri Toyama and I did last Wednesday) we always say the words from Jesus: “This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”

Yes, forgiveness is a big deal. It’s a throughline, a command, a call. But what is forgiveness? How do we do it and how do we know when it has happened? I appreciated all the good questions you asked me to preach about this summer. Today for the third and final sermon in this series, our question is this one: How does forgiveness really work? On the surface, this may seem like an easy one! God forgives us our sins, Christ died for our sins, and so we have to forgive others. End of story. End of sermon. Right?... After all, isn’t forgiveness a feel-good act that magically provides a happy resolution for all those involved? Good as new. The slate wiped clean. The faster the better. For everyone, always. You may have heard this.

Such quick and full resolution is applauded and often expected. But when it comes to the business of humans forgiving one another: this narrow understanding of forgiveness is neither biblical nor true to real life. Your good question has opened the door to this sermon where we get to dig a little deeper into a broader understanding of forgiveness than what is traditionally talked about or expected, in real life, in media stories, and in movies. Jesus’ parable will help us.

If we are honest, I believe most of us have a rather mixed relationship with this business of forgiveness. We need a clear definition of forgiveness in order to know when it has happened. We often think of forgiving as primarily a matter of emotions and attitudes. We may have been taught that to forgive means we let go of negative emotions, like anger and hatred

against someone who has wronged us, and replace them with more positive ones, like compassion and love. And in doing so, the relationship goes back to the way it was. I have good news: If you stay with me, I want to show you how Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son can open us up to a broader understanding of forgiveness.

Philosopher Myisha Cherry, in her book titled, *Failures of Forgiveness: What We Get Wrong and How to Do Better*, articulates what she calls a broader view of forgiveness which leads to restoration and repair. Rather than kind of a one and done surface apology, "I said I'm sorry, why can't you get over it and we can go back to the way things were" her carefully researched and argued analysis, I believe, reflects what Jesus really meant about the power and the challenges of forgiveness. I invite you to open your heart and mind to the fullness of his teaching and life on earth about forgiveness. It is a journey with many paths. Dr. Cherry broadens out what "forgiveness" looks like to include all of the following: choosing to moderate negative emotions, viewing the wrongdoer in a new light, forswearing revenge, mending a relationship but choosing not to continue it, commit to not bringing up the wrongdoing again, refuse to focus on the wrongdoing, and saying "I forgive you."ⁱ

Let's consider Jesus' parable that you have likely heard before. Does it thrill or threaten you? Perhaps both/and. When we studied it in our confirmation class this year, we had older and younger siblings (among the six students and their six mentors) and this story inspired a robust conversation about the conflicting emotions it aroused. I'm sure those of you who are regular church goers have heard countless sermons based on this parable. Today's may be a little different. I am going to go out on a limb and try to rehab the reputation of the elder brother. Yes: the withholding, resentful older brother who refuses to join the grace party and instead chooses to wallow in his self-righteous anger. At least not at first.

I applaud his honesty, even in the presence of his father. His courage to stand up and communicate his truth: "I do not accept this message. I have been wronged and I am valuable." Friends, this kind of anger is compatible with love. Contrary to what you may have been taught: love and anger can have the same aim.ⁱⁱ Righteous anger calls out difficult truths between family members, and also between groups that have caused social harm and destruction. I was surprised to hear the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, tell my doctoral class that was visiting with him in Cape Town, South Africa in 2016, that as he looked back at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearings he led in 1996-1998, as they sought to repair the damage of Apartheid there, for all the powerful sharing between victims and victimizers, they got an important thing wrong. Considering the persistent problems in the years to follow, that perhaps victims had forgiven too quickly and easily the racist system that had been in place for decades.

As Dr. Cherry further explained in her book regarding the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearings, "They set up a false binary choice; victims had only two options—a "willingness to forgive" or a "willingness to wreak vengeance," thereby setting up forgiveness as the alternative to revenge."ⁱⁱⁱ Here is a truth that we Christians often resist acknowledging: "The afterlife of wrongdoing can make it impossible to ever trust that person or

group of people again."^{iv} But as Dr. Cherry teaches us: that doesn't mean that forgiveness isn't happening. Nor that vengeance is the only alternative.

I believe God's "grace upon grace" that we have all received through Christ, includes grace *as we navigate our forgiveness journey*. Unlike the father's instant and full forgiveness of his wayward son, in Jesus' parable signified by his running toward him, kissing him, clothing and feeding him with his finest offerings. A visual image we use to picture God's forgiveness of us. Our human path to forgiving someone or a group of people who have wronged us, is different. It doesn't happen in an instant. It may take years. God knows this about us.

I have come to see Jesus shining a light on this truth in the way the elder son responds to his brother's return. He is angry at first, we know that. But we don't know whether he calmed down soon enough to join the party, even just on the edges. Or if in time he came to accept a limited relationship with his brother. We can only speculate. Friends, I hear Jesus calling us to commit to the journey of forgiveness. Wherever that may take us. I can hear this broader view of forgiveness even in the Lord's prayer petition: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. This is not a quid pro quo, a transactional formula. Rather this little phrase "as we forgive" hints at an ongoing journey. The prayer is not "when we forgive" but "as we forgive" – "Forgive us our debts as we traverse our forgiveness journey toward someone or some people who have wronged us.

Perhaps you have a family member or a friend you may be struggling to forgive right now. It may be something that they have done to you yesterday, or years ago. That person may have caused your family deep hurt or harm. Or perhaps it is something about that person that is beyond a single thing they have done. It may be that you are *struggling to forgive them for who they are*: something about their character and their basic nature.^v Take the younger brother in Jesus' parable as an example. Did you ever consider that the younger brother, the so called "prodigal son," who took the money and ran, burning through his entire inheritance, maybe he was kind of an annoying jerk *before* he ever did that terrible thing? Who knows. It's just a parable with plenty of space for wild speculation. And oceans of learning still await us. The more you look at it, the more you see.

Exactly one year ago today, on August 25, 2023, I fell against our aluminum fishing boat and fractured my right wrist, the radius bone. I was blessed to receive excellent medical care with surgery that brought the bone back into line with the help of an appliance that is now permanently a part of my wrist bone. While I am grateful to report that it has returned to full functionality, enabling me to do my work at the keyboard, play my cello, and still enjoy paddling on my paddleboard, my wrist is not the same as it was before the break. It is repaired, but it is different. It looks different. It feels different. It will never be the same.

So too, with broken, fractured relationships. They will never be the same as before the break or harm or hurt occurred. Yet, by God's grace, and our choice to embark on a forgiveness journey with Jesus by your side: healing will happen over time. Forgiveness will happen along the way. The relationship may regain full functionality, at an even deeper level of understanding

than before. Or not. The relationship may take on a different, more limited dimension. Forgiveness can yield a variety of outcomes. All through the light of Christ's unfailing love and our open, trusting heart.

I have a prayer written by Ted Loder titled "Unlock the Door of My Heart" to end this sermon, and to give you a moment to let God speak to your heart. If your forgiveness journey needs healing this day, consider bringing that prayer of your heart forward during our Service of Healing & Wholeness in a few minutes. May the anointing and the blessing strengthen, clarify, and affirm your commitment to love that person as Jesus loves us. For now, let us pray:

Jesus said,

*"your sins are forgiven;
rise and walk."*

*Forgiveness is an unlocked door
to walk through
into a wide-open world.*

*Forgiveness is a seed
to water with new dreams and wilds risks
until it bears unexpected fruit.*

*Forgiveness is an enemy-friend
to be born out of,
a quietness beneath the clamor.*

*Forgiveness is a flower to smell,
a wind at my back,
a gull to scream with,
a pain to laugh beneath,
a burden that carries me.*

*It is I
becoming We
becoming Yours.*

*Forgiveness is a song to sing.
O Lord,
unlock the door of my heart.^{vi}*

Amen.

ⁱ Myisha Cherry, *Failures of Forgiveness: What We Get Wrong and How to Do Better*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ: 2023), p.23.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p.102

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 72-73.

^{iv} Ibid, p.106

^v Ibid

^{vi} Ted Loder, "Unlock the Door of My Heart," *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, (LuraMedia: San Diego, CA, 1984), p.55.