

“Learning to Forgive”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
The First Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2010
Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Great God, you are rich in mercy and forgiveness beyond our knowing. Show us what we need to understand, and help us to learn how to practice forgiveness in all our relationships, so we might experience the renewal of the life you offer us in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

As most of you are aware, I am sure, we have entered the Season of Lent. – the six-week period of preparing ourselves spiritually for the great celebration of Easter. Lent has traditionally been a penitential season of reflection, prayer, and self-giving, so the theme of forgiveness fits well with the purpose of this season. And so, while I most often preach from the texts suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary, I have opted for this Lent to focus on the theme of forgiveness.

The Christian faith is indelibly marked by the invitation to receive, and the imperative to offer, forgiveness. Forgiveness is the fountain from which new life flows in a wounded, strife-weary world. Although most great faith traditions give at least some weight to it, it can be reasonably argued that the idea of forgiveness is more central and distinctive to Christianity than any other religion. Jesus’ words from the cross, forgiving those who crucified him in a profound embodiment of what he taught, reveal this centrality. It can certainly be questioned whether the followers of Jesus actually practice forgiveness, more than people of other faiths. And perhaps this is, in part, because Christians differ widely in their interpretations of how forgiveness should be practiced.

Some urge forgiveness as a Christian duty under all circumstances, while others argue that certain conditions must be met before forgiveness can be meaningful or effective. Some see forgiveness as a matter between particular individuals, and some regard it as meaningful only in the context of

larger human communities. Some believe forgiving is the surest route to healing for the injured, while others hold that therapy cannot be the essence of Christian forgiveness.

How do we sort through such competing claims and interpretations? What is the core of this powerful gift in which we are called to participate? And how do we get past some of our emotional barriers to real forgiveness? These are the kinds of questions we will explore together in the coming weeks. While it is certainly a theme suited particularly well to the season of Lent, it is a topic which is fit for any season of our lives.

The reading we heard this morning from Luke’s gospel is a story with which we are pretty familiar- the story often referred to as “The Prodigal Son”. We tend to assume that only one of the three main characters of this story needs forgiveness. It is, after all, the younger son who demands his portion of his father’s inheritance before even a hint of his father’s demise.

In traditional Near Eastern culture, this would have been inexcusable behavior in its own right. He then blunders forward into ruin, squandering his entire fortune in “high living” and finding himself broke in the face of an unexpected famine. It is hard – and even harder for the audience to whom Jesus was speaking – to sympathize with a young man so self-absorbed and foolish. The last straw to Jewish ears would have been his complete self-degradation by hiring himself out to a pig farmer. You see, not only has this son dishonored his father and led a morally reprehensible life; he has also defiled himself by association with unclean animals.

Certainly, this young man needs to turn himself around and seek forgiveness. His sins are abundantly clear. Sure enough, once he realizes his predicament and remembers what his father’s household is like, he undergoes an inward repentance. His mental speech to his father reveals – first an admission of offense, “I have sinned against heaven and before you”, then - a turn to shame and humility, “I have sinned against you and before you.”, then a turn to shame and humility, “I am no longer worthy to be called

your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

Everything is in order so far. The younger son is in need of forgiveness and has taken steps which could make his father’s forgiveness possible. But this story is not so simple. The father in this tale does not act like a typical Middle Eastern patriarch, gravely standing on his authority, testing the authenticity of his younger son’s intentions and slowly relenting on his own legitimate grievances. Rather, this father acts like a Jewish mama, incurably attached to a youngest child, rushing forward to embrace this filthy boy, not even waiting for him to finish his repentance speech. Then the father orders up a big party to celebrate the return of this extravagant waster of wealth.

Is this father acting responsibly? Is his behavior excusable? Does he need to be forgiven for allowing his emotions to rule the day, for acting without dignity or justice?

Apparently, the older brother thinks so. He is appalled by what he sees his father doing upon his younger brother’s return. The elder son feels the sting of injustice keenly. He has been dutiful, respectful, and responsible all of his life. He has done everything according to law and custom, yet his father has never thrown a party to celebrate his right living. What he surely sees is an obvious breach of equity in his father’s treatment of his two sons. His father, it seems, just takes his older son for granted and shows clear favoritism toward the younger son. The elder brother suffers “self-righteous indignation. He feels aggrieved about how his father welcomes back the younger son, without conditions or any apparent concern for justice. We can imagine how the elder son’s resentment of his brother arose when the younger made a premature claim on his share of the family inheritance. Surely resentment grew deeper over the period of time his brother was absent. Reports of reckless, wasteful, and immoral behavior must have come back through the grapevine, shaming and dishonoring the family’s reputation – Dontcha think?!

No doubt the older brother’s heart had

long since closed toward his younger brother. He had suffered from a hard heart, a sclerosis of love. Did he also need his father's forgiveness? Did these two brothers need to forgive each other, as well?

As we hear this parable with different ears, perhaps we begin to see the complexity of this simple parable. Jesus seems to want us to grapple with various forms of alienation from each other and from God. Perhaps he hopes we will learn to see ourselves in this story in more than one way.

In preparation for this sermon, I read a story about life among the Dakota Sioux Indians which illustrates the less obvious, communal dynamics of forgiveness.

It seems that a young man in the tribe had been murdered and his enraged relatives had gathered to plan revenge. The eldest male in the clan listened to them talk about their aggrieved feelings and vindictive intentions, repeating to them what they heard him say. He then smoked quietly and calmly for a while. Finally, he spoke again to say there was a better way – a harder, but better, way they would take. He told them to go home, look over their possessions, and bring back the one thing they prized most.

“The gifts you bring,” he said, “shall go to the murderer, for a token of our sincerity and our purpose. Though he has hurt us, we shall make him a relative, in place of the one who is not here. Was the dead your brother? Then this man shall be your brother. As for me, the dead was my nephew. Therefore, his slayer shall be my nephew. And from now on he shall be one of us. We shall regard him as though he were our dead kinsman returned to us.”

The “harder way” demanded of each person in the clan a powerful inner struggle to master pride, anger, and desire for revenge. But they accepted the challenge, because they could see that it was deeply right. They realized that a violent response would only fuel fires of hate over time, but that the difficult task of taking this man into their family on a daily basis had the

potential to heal them all. At the appointed time, the murderer was brought into the council tepee, and given the peace pipe with these words: “Smoke, with these your new kinsmen seated her. For they have chosen to take you to themselves in place of one who is not here...It is their desire that henceforth you shall go in and out among them without fear. By these presents which they have brought here for you, they would have you know that whatever love and compassion they had for him is now yours, forever.” Deeply moved, the slayer began to weep. While the Sioux elder never used the term, this story is one of forgiveness. And surely the man would prove himself the best possible kinsman, given the high price of his redemption. The community we were made for is the life Christ came to renew. We participate in this renewal each time we celebrate Communion. Perhaps it should not surprise us that the Native American peace-pipe ritual bears some parallel to this Christian sacrament. Each man smoking the common pipe is reminded of his own center, also understood to be the center of each person and the center of the universe. Do we not also understand that Christ dwells deep down – even if unrecognized – in every person. Remember Jesus’ words “just as you did it to one of the least of these...,you did it to me.”?

My friends, as we begin this season of Lent – the season when we approach the throne of God, admitting our sins – those things we have done and those things we have left undone – it is important that we learn what it means to ask for forgiveness – but also, what it means to give forgiveness. For the rest of the Sundays until Easter, we will hear words and ideas which give us ideas of how to give forgiveness and how to ask for forgiveness. It is my hope and my prayer that each of us will complete our journey to the cross with the knowledge that our Easter Joy has to be preceded by the acknowledgement of our need to be forgiven and also to forgive.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

This and other sermons during this Lenten Season are based upon a Lenten Study written by Marjorie Thompson, author, pastor and retreat leader in the ministry of spiritual formation, which was printed in “The Thoughtful Christian” to which First Church subscribes.

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