

Luke 15: 11-20

Coming to Your Senses: Forgiving Yourself

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This month our worship theme is forgiveness. Our sermons will use the Parable of the Prodigal Son to look at forgiveness from several perspectives. We have chosen this story as a touchstone for two reasons: 1. It is one of greatest Biblical stories and 2. The children will be studying it in Bible Village for next six weeks.

I would like to start by saying that forgiveness is not easy. It is hard work to forgive someone who has hurt you. When people show forgiveness it makes the news. For example, when an assassin tried to kill Pope John Paul II in 1981 the pontiff wanted to meet with his assailant. The Pope sought to build a relationship with Methmut Agca and visited him in his jail on several occasions. Most of us strive to forgive people who have injured us, but feelings run hard when someone feels wronged or injured. Feelings run high when you see yourself as the victims of injustice. Just look at the reaction to the Boston Marathon bombing. When it came time to bury Tamerlan Tsarnaev his body was finally laid to rest in an undisclosed location in a cemetery in rural Virginia. People were so reluctant to forgive him that his dead body had to be shipped to a secret grave out of state. Forgiveness is something we all struggle with. Someone in the office irks you or undermines you and you find it hard to forgive. A neighbor gossips about you or bullies your family and it is hard to let it go. A family member stops talking to you or starts talking way too much about you and it cuts deep. Maybe you yourself have done something that you are not proud of and it is hard to admit it, much less seek forgiveness.

Forgiveness is one of the hardest things in life. Jesus talked about, and probably works on it too. He tried to demonstrate forgiveness when it mattered most, at the end of his life when he asked God to forgive those who had killed him. But he also taught his disciples to forgive. Here in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus explains how we all can learn the art of forgiveness. Let's take a closer look.

**In the first place, Jesus says you learn to forgive by accepting your own humanity.**

The Prodigal Son was a restless young man. He wanted to leave home. He was cocky. He had the kind of arrogance that springs from enormous insecurity, so he needed to prove himself. He was disdainful of his father, but he also needed to test his affections. So he asked for his share of the inheritance. That is an insult, a stunning insult to his father. It is like saying "I am just waiting for your money when you die, so why not give it to me now." In the face of his son's disdain, his father was gracious and he gave the boy his share of the estate.

The young man took the money and went to a far country across the Sea of Galilee, the Las Vegas of the Galilee, a place known for its wild parties and general debauchery. There, the Prodigal Son spend it all, his share of his father's savings. He threw it away on fancy things that did not last. When he had used it all, a famine came and he was hungry so he took a job working for a landowner who assigned the Prodigal Son to feeding pigs. He must have waited until he was starving because feeding pigs was the lowest job, and one no Jew would ever want, as pigs were forbidden, taboo, untouchable. But this man was feeding them and handling them every day.

The Bible says that the Prodigal Son came to his senses in the pig pen. This young man who had been running from home, and trying to prove himself hit rock bottom when he had less

to eat than the pigs. This arrogant young man finally saw himself honestly and had to admit that this chapter of his life was a colossal failure. There in the pig pen, this man realized that his father's servants had more food than he did. They certainly had more dignity. He decided to go home and beg for forgiveness, and ask for a job as a servant in his father's estate. Sobered by his failure, and wiser, he decided to admit to his father he now knew he was not worthy to be his son, but would be honored to be his servant.

The Prodigal Son did not have to go back. Many people in his shoes might have remained estranged from their families. He might have nursed his pride. He might have even lived cut off and projected all his hurt and anger onto his dad. He might have imagined that his father wanted him to suffer. People tell themselves all kinds of things. But to his credit, he did not decide to become a victim of his own foolishness. He did not rationalize his folly, and pretend things were fine. He did not cling to appearances, and justify himself. He forgave himself for being a jerk. I think that he had his greatest moment in that pigpen. Sitting with those pigs, he found real stature for the first time. He had to hit the bottom to find his best self. One translation says that there he came to himself.

This story has many personal implications, but I believe it also has some political and environmental implications too, especially as we consider climate change. When we look at the effects of climate change in our world it is hard to avoid the analogy between the Prodigal Son and those of us in the first world who are using the precious resources we have inherited. The statistics in Africa alone are pretty stunning. Lake Chad, which used to be size of Lake Erie has shrunk in the last 5 decades from almost 10,000 square miles to 500 square miles. Lake Victoria has warmed up so much the fish supply is compromised, which affects 20 million people who eat

fish in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Worldwide we have seen ferocious storm patterns, which are unprecedented since people have tracked weather.

I mention climate change in a sermon on forgiveness, because I feel that first world people have yet to sit down and recognize what we have wrought. When the time comes it is not clear whether we will justify ourselves, or come to our best selves. It is not clear whether we will be honest about this mess and willing to forgive ourselves for the sake of change. George Philander, professor of geosciences at Princeton says in *Christian Century* “Instead of telling stories of doom and gloom, we should tell people what an amazing planet we live on, because it is so amazing...We are on a ship in a fog in treacherous water...We should be doing something not because we know what is going to happen, but because we don’t know.” {“Temperature Rising: Climate Crisis in Africa” by Eileen Flanagan *Christian Century*, August 21, 2013, p. 26}

**Finally, people learn forgiveness in communities.** The Prodigal Son was able to come to his best self because his father had created a family where he knew he could always go home. Some families and some communities foster a climate of forgiveness. Others do not. They blame people for their mistakes, and shame them if they think they have done wrong. They create places where everyone is nervous because at any time, whether you are guilty or not, people feel justified in calling you on the carpet, or reading you the riot act, or cross examining you. This atmosphere just serves to make people scared. People start covering up mistakes, or imagined mistakes. There is no trust. It becomes hard to forgive one another, because forgiveness gets all tied up with losing face. It is hard to build that kind of community if you are uptight about appearance, and worried about being perfect. Only human people can learn to forgive.

From 1995- 1997 Archbishop Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and listened to 21,000 witnesses describe human rights abuses and atrocities committed during the

apartheid era. At times he wept openly after hearing the tales of torture, or people's limbs being blasted off with blow torches. Tutu decided that he had to forgive the perpetrators to foster healing...Forgiveness is not cheap and reconciliation is not easy, but with forgiveness we open the door for someone... who might have been shackled to the past, to break loose the shackles and walk through the door to the future." *The Wisdom of Forgiveness* by the Dalai Lama and Victor Chan New York: Riverhead Books, 2004, p. 67.

At one hearing on the Bishu Massacre, Tutu reported they heard that thirty people were killed and 200 injured. "At a public hearing people packed the room to the rafters all affected by their personal injury or the loss of a loved one or dear friends. Four officers responsible for the massacre came in and you could feel the tension in the room. One white officer spoke 'yes we gave the order for the soldiers to shoot.' The tension was thick in the room, and then the man said, 'Please forgive us; please forgive these three colleagues and receive them back into the community.' Now you would imagine the hall would erupt in anger. You know what the audience did? They applauded. Incredible. They applauded. Then Tutu said "Let's keep a moment's silence, because we are in the presence of something holy. We are standing on holy ground and we should take off our shoes like Moses." *Ibid.* p. 68.

A lot has been written about the Red Sox come from behind victory this baseball season. Their manager attributed their success to their character. I liked Ken Burns editorial in today's *Boston Globe*. He said that they were great because they were so human. After Game 6, Dustin Pedroia said "I love this team," a stunning admission of human affection.

In South Africa there is a quality called Ubuuntu. When someone wants to praise you the highest praise is to say you have ubuuntu- that person has what it takes to be a human being.

“This is a person who recognizes that he exists only because others exist: a person is a person being part of something bigger than him or herself. When you have ubuntu we mean that you are gentle, you are compassionate, you are hospitable, you want to share, you care about the welfare of others. My humanity is caught up in your humanity. When I dehumanize you I also inadvertently dehumanize myself. For we can only be human, we can only be free together. To forgive is actually the best form of self-interest.” *Ibid*

Whether you are influencing your family or leading a team at work or chairing a committee meeting or working with others in the church you and I can foster forgiveness, or not. It is a decision you make, much like Desmond Tutu did. You can demand retribution and project perfection or strive to hold up – ubuntu. But we decide every day. It is a hard decision, but it can be done, and it gets easier with practice.

Let us pray...