

The Other Prodigal Son

Luke 15: 25-32

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I have to admit something to you: I am tired of what is probably the Bible's probably most beloved parable. For someone who has been in ministry for almost 20 years, what else is there to say about this passage? Can we truly tease something new and exciting out of this over-preached story? Probably not. And the even bigger challenge is to preach about it in relationship to our monthly theme: forgiveness. It seems pretty clear who has to seek and give forgiveness.

Why is it that the Christian community has such a love affair with this story? Because it is one of those stories where we can truly identify with the characters. Maybe you are the 'bad' boy or girl in your family, and maybe you have lived the wild life before realizing that was not doing it for you. So you came home – broke, your ego banged up, seeking a new start with family and friends, seeking forgiveness for your bad behavior.

Maybe you have been on the receiving end of forgiveness. Maybe you have done something really stupid that hurt a lot of people but when you returned home, to your surprise, people seemed to still love you and willing to forgive. Or maybe you are the parent who says that no matter what your child/ren are doing, you will always love them. Your door will always be open. Maybe you are those parents who will give their last shirt off their backs for the happiness of their children. Or maybe you are the older brother or sister, always steady, always considerate of others, keeping on the straight and narrow, doing what life requires of you, working hard, providing for your family and aging parents, seeking the well-being of others first, yet feeling you are under-appreciated, your good deeds go unrecognized, and nobody notices your hard work.

Many people like this story because they identify with the prodigal. We all have gone through times when we selfishly squandered resources or were careless about relationships. All we could see at the time was ourselves and our needs and wants with no regard for the people around us. Eventually we had to crawl back home and beg for forgiveness.

Actually in my family, things were a little turned around. In her younger years, my older sister was the prodigal one, the bad girl. I, the younger one, watching my sister and her ways, tried to

please anyone in the family. I took on the role of the 'good' one. Although that changed when I came to the US to study. Everyone expected me to go back to Germany after a year but, as you know, I did not. I think that from some of the comments I have heard over the years, some of my family members thought that was pretty radical, selfish and inconsiderate. But on the other hand I did not squander anyone's resources in the process. And I never thought that I had to ask for forgiveness for finding my way in this world.

So I think that a good number of people identify with the elder son. Remember him? Most commentaries and sermons pay scant attention to his role in the narrative.

Even though the Bible itself does not give the story a title, tradition calls it the parable of the Prodigal Son, not the parable of the Dutiful Son or even the parable of the Two Brothers. Yet the younger son's antics constitute only the first half of the tale. The rest of the story is about the older son, the one who stays on the farm with his father, tending the cows and threshing wheat while his no-good brother is off drinking and gambling and doing god-knows-what. The elder brother has always done what he was supposed to do. He has played by the rules, obeyed his father, and worked himself to the bone.

No wonder he raises hell when the reprobate shows up one day seeking to get back into the father's good graces. The dutiful older sons and daughters know it's just not fair. What's the point of always doing what you're supposed to do if it doesn't earn you a few advantages? When the prodigal's father decides to throw a homecoming bash for his lost son, my heart goes out to the elder brother. The older son gets no party, no fatted calves, no ruby rings. Instead, dad comes outside with a few words for his sulking son: "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15: 31-32).

And that's where the story ends. Jesus doesn't tell us what happens next. It might be nice to imagine that the father's words console the elder brother and convince him to join the party, but I don't think so. The little speech is pretty lame. It reflects a father's point of view, not that of a dutiful son. Do our parents really expect us to love our siblings as much as they do? It is easy for me to imagine the elder's anguish stretching into weeks, months, and maybe years, renewed every time he sees his worthless brother strutting around in his new robe and flashing his fancy ring.

As I said, commentators usually focus on the father's graciousness towards his younger son, making the story a theological allegory, telling us how gracious God is. That's fine. But

forgiveness of a child comes fairly easy for a parent. What loving father would not forgive a wayward son who returns home penitential and humble, no matter how wasteful he has been? There is nothing remarkable in that. The real story of forgiveness in the parable comes into focus when we consider the older son. He too must forgive the younger son, and it will be far harder for him than for the father. And, what's more, he may also have to forgive his father.

That contention may make little sense if we only think of forgiveness as receiving pardon for violating a rule or a precept. The younger brother did nothing to harm his elder sibling. His recklessness did not diminish the older one's life in the least. Nor did the father's joy and spontaneous merry-making at his lost son's reappearance mean he loved the elder any less. No laws were broken, no commandments were violated, no boundaries transgressed. And yet we know, things are not well with the older son. He is seething with anger and resentment. So why should the older son consider forgiveness even though no one asks to be forgiven?

Because to forgive is not just divine but also good for your health. I have done a little research on the topic of forgiveness and health. It turns out that this was a really hot topic in the 90's, and has continued to remain as such.

Forgiveness research, together with other mind-body research encourages a fundamental shift away from treatment of disease to focusing on the positive and spiritual aspects of human nature as a basis for healing. Sure, I can take a pill to treat the physical symptoms of depression or high blood pressure, but it would be helpful to address the possible psychological/spiritual issue that might lie behind an illness.

The research findings suggest that forgiveness works in several ways. One is by reducing the stress of un-forgiveness which usually is a toxic mixture of anger, bitterness, hatred, resentment and fear (fear of being humiliated or hurt again). These negative emotions have specific physical consequences including increased blood pressure, adrenaline and cortisol levels, which have been linked to cardiovascular disease, immune suppression and, possibly, impaired neurological function and memory.

A second way forgiveness works is more subtle, as shown in studies indicating that people with strong social networks—friends, neighbors and family— tend to be healthier than loners. According to psychologists, someone who is angry and remembers every slight is likely to lose relationships during the course of a lifetime, while people who are forgiving are more likely to attract and keep a strong social support system—to the benefit of their own health.

When you forgive, you let go. Forgiveness means relinquishment. To relinquish something is to release whatever power it holds over us. It's that simple, and yet so hard. If I forgive someone for a wrong done to me, I no longer allow that event to determine how I treat the other person. I may remember the wrong or I may forget it, but either way I have disarmed it. It no longer determines my actions, thoughts, or words.

But we also know that forgiveness in this sense is rarely easy or quick. How often do we say, we "forgive" another person, but still hold a secret grudge? Because of its difficulty, forgiveness has to be practiced. It is less an act than a way of living, a discipline, a cultivated skill. I think this is why Jesus told his students to forgive "seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21). True forgiveness often comes only at the end of an inner struggle. (I am attaching to the sermon a list of 12 steps on "How to forgive". See if that is useful advice in case you are looking for some.)

If we view forgiveness in this light, perhaps we can see why it is necessary for the elder brother to forgive and why it will be so difficult. As long as he regards himself as slighted, as being treated unfairly by the father, that notion will worm its way into his soul and embitter him and make his life a living hell. It hardly matters whether the injustices he suffers were real or imagined. Either way, his struggle is with his own thoughts.

The Buddha, a kindred spirit with Jesus on this matter, says it this way: "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; but you are the one who gets burned."

If we need a reason to learn how to forgive, this is a good one. We forgive to be free, to be liberated from the destructive power of anger and hatred and hurt. Of course, it's a lot easier to nourish the thoughts of indignation. It's hard to surrender the delicious feeling that we've suffered unfairly. But ultimately that sense does us no good. The elder brother might wallow in his hurt feelings, but what's the point of that? How much better is it for him to let them go, to follow the discipline of relinquishment. Sure, it's the harder path, but in the end the rewards are worth it.

I'd like to think the older brother eventually realized that.

Let us pray:

Holy one we know that to err is human, but to forgive divine. Help all of us to forgive people who have hurt us. Heal our emotions that have been wounded and teach us how to love unconditionally. Amen.

Suggestions for further study:

Frederic Luskin, a Stanford researcher, had done extensive studies on Forgiveness and Healing. He has written a book *Forgive for Good* (Harper Collins 2002) that is worthwhile reading.

The Nature of Forgiveness

Luskin defines forgiveness as "...the moment to moment experience of peace and understanding that occurs when an injured party's suffering is reduced by the process of transforming a grievance they have held against an offending party."

Forgiveness is not forgetting. In fact, one must acknowledge negative emotions and events before forgiveness can occur.

Forgiveness is not pardoning, excusing, or stating that an offense will be treated as acceptable behavior in the future.

Forgiveness is, first and foremost, an internal process. It is primarily for you.

The term pseudo-forgiveness has been used to describe forgiveness that occurs with ulterior motives, such as wanting to aggravate or prove the offender's wrongdoings. This approach is not likely to have healing benefits.

Forgiveness is a path to freedom. It frees one from the control of the 'offender.'

Forgiveness can break patterns that would otherwise interfere with future relationships.

Forgiveness can take time and hard work.

Forgiveness need not require reconciliation.

Steps to Forgiveness

To make forgiveness part of your life, follow these expert guidelines:

1. Commit yourself. Decide to do whatever you have to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you, not for anyone else.
2. Get the frustration out. Tell your story to a few close friends. This will help you explore your feelings and obtain a clearer sense of perspective.
3. Practice focusing on the good and positive things in your life: loving family members, exhilarating workouts, kind acts by strangers, nature's beauty, favorite music, and so on. Try to recognize goodness, niceness and kindness, and thank people often.
4. Develop the mind-body technique for deep, slow breathing. Use it immediately to help calm and refocus yourself whenever a painful memory or the sight of someone hurtful upsets you.
5. Learn to recognize your "grievance stories"—in which you blame offenders for how you feel. Instead of mentally replaying the hurts over and over, focus on your own positive goals. For

example, for one person this might mean getting past anger at a parent for an abusive childhood to instead concentrating on personal goals of becoming fitter and learning to be a better parent oneself.

6. Start with small things. Work on forgiving traffic miscreants, cell-phone screamers, rude clients and the many people or things that push our buttons but don't really matter. *Don't* start by trying to forgive the person who's wronged you the most in your life.

7. Focus on facts rather than emotions. Don't condone hurtful behavior, but attempt to understand what led to it.

8. Try not to take things personally. Many offenses were not deliberately targeted to hurt you personally, but were byproducts of other people's own selfish goals. It helps to recognize that, says Luskin.

9. Forgive those you love. According to Luskin, grievance stories for long-past offenses too often become roadblocks that stop us from moving forward. The most important people to forgive are those close to us.

10. Practice first. You might not be ready to forgive someone today, but if you were, what would it sound like? Practice saying it out loud to yourself when you are alone. Then when you are ready to forgive, it is available to you.

11. Further educate yourself about forgiveness. Check local colleges, churches or hospitals for classes or workshops, plus libraries or the Internet for further reading.

12. Continue focusing on what's in it for you. Remind yourself that "winning" is not always about who is right. Forgiving can free you to move on with your life. After all, living well is the best revenge.

A final note: Always remember that forgiveness is a process, not a moment, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution, says Edward M. Hallowell, MD, psychiatrist and author of *Dare to Forgive: The Power of Letting Go and Moving On* (Health Communications 2004). However you diffuse your anger, forgiveness can be a powerful tool to a happier, healthier future.