

Pastor Roy's Sermon from March 10, 2013

Joshua 5:9-12, Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The prodigal son. Who doesn't like this parable!? God loves the wayward sinner—a selfish son who disregards and squanders his inheritance but then realizes his folly and seeks sanctuary in his father's fair treatment of his servants. We find comfort in One who love us despite our weakness and error.

But then we come to the end of the parable, and we meet the responsible, hard working, score keeping big brother who is clearly not pleased with the fuss about his irresponsible sibling. The parable just ends with the father's call to reconciliation.

We don't know how it ends! Are the brothers reconciled? Does the older brother throw out the younger when the father ultimately dies...or do they finish out their days in silence? Will the younger brother endure an unpayable debt to the son who was forced to accept the father's mercy and share his inheritance that wasn't wasted?

Ouch! This is not a story just about God's mercy. This is also a story about our struggle to forgive. Our tendency to withhold God's mercy for the “undeserving.” Will we complete the story with Grace? Or will we begrudge God's mercy!? Think about the brothers!

We often think in terms of good people and bad people. For example, “These are helpful folks in our community, these others. . .not so much. This is a valuable, good person, that is a shameful, bad one. I like this person, I don't like that one. This one helped me once, this one hurt me once. Our judgments are sometimes based on family or friends' judgments. Sometimes they just boil down to chemistry.

If we're honest, especially when we're not being mindful of Christ's love, we tend to treat those we prefer better than those whom we dislike. We tend to quietly punish those who have hurt us—those whom we have come to mistrust. Those whom we have written off as hopeless or “jerks.”

Sometimes we don't even realize we are withholding favor—entrapping them in their past. “That's just how I relate to 'so-in-so.’”

What does it feel like to owe a debt you cannot pay? Equally bad, how does it feel to go through life with an unforgiving spirit?

Does it cause life to spring forth with creativity, hope, beauty, and joy?

Or does it crush us? Oppress us? Diminish the life within us?

How difficult it is to forgive! --To let someone off the hook! Yes, to confess bafflement but to actively choose to withhold harsh judgments at foolishness, selfish, perhaps extremely ignorant actions? That is a challenge.

This is not the stuff of simply saying “I'm sorry,” or “I forgive you.” If the offense is horrible enough, here is a practice which will consume us every time our minds take us back “there” again.

We all know that “forgive and forget” is well intentioned lie. There is no forgetting what others have

done to us and what we have done to others. None. Forgiveness would not be a discipline if it were easy. Clearly it is not.

If *every* day we live with pain caused by another, then *every* day we will struggle mightily to forgive.

Those who struggle to forgive are not bad people. They are honest people. If we try to forgive, sometimes that is enough. Is not forgiveness a process?

At first, it is enough to acknowledge the sin of another before God. We confess, “God, this person crushed me. I hate them for it. That is called a lament! The book of the Lamentations of Jeremiah is just that—it throws the grief, the injustice, the horror, the despair, and the resentment all out on the table to be viewed by all. We cannot forgive until we Lament. Lamenting is not a sin, it is being honest.

But the next step is also a prayer, “God, I don't want to spend the rest of my life hating this person, or these people. I want to forgive.”

Life returns as we confess and seek healing from the giver of life. Forgiveness comes with healing.

Healing takes time and effort. Forgiveness takes time. God is patient and we must be patient with one another.

Healing isn't about pretending something never happened. Denial brings shame for everyone involved.

Healing leads to reconciliation. Reconciliation is when we are open to a alternate, more hopeful future than the past.

If 20 years later, I still, in moments of honesty hate a person who offended me or my family or friend, but I am still open to forgiving that person, even if they are dead, that is a healthy thing.

Forgiveness is not about closing out a debt. It's about managing it with Grace. It's about praying for grace to have grace, each day in which bitterness threatens us.

If confessing our hatred and unforgiveness is all we can do in the present moment, then surely that is enough. God brings the healing with time, with further reflection, and mostly when we take part in relationships of hope and peace.

When we relate to others in love, the love gives us strength to let go of the need to get revenge, to see someone suffer for what they did to me or “mine.” But letting go of the desire for revenge is not the result of feeling shame or guilt, it flows from love. When we love and are loved, that grace fills the void left by the harmful actions of others.

We don't forgive by forcing ourselves to love an offender, we forgive when we love and are loved by others. Then the love and forgiveness takes us by surprise! This takes time and lots of grace. But I stand by the truth that it is more important to be honest than to pretend.

God is not unreasonable! Forgiveness is probably the most difficult of disciplines. It tests our faith in a gracious God.

Grace is a relationship. It might be a turbulent relationship, but grace holds out hope for a better future. Grace holds out hope that there might be full reconciliation. Grace struggles mightily in the process of reconciliation.

The cross is our example of the mighty struggle toward reconciliation. The appearance of the cross is that it is folly—that Jesus wasted his life by allowing his enemies to steal it away. But the resurrection says otherwise. Resurrection is the reconciliation!

Will the older brother find it possible to love his brother again? Will he discover the power and beauty of love and mercy? Will he discover the freedom of letting the debt go? I don't know. I guess the ending is up to us.

A footnote: In our struggle to forgive, we do well to push ourselves to do so rather than giving up too soon and saying, “Oh, that's the best I can do.” Remember that to the extent that we are able to forgive others, so will we feel we are forgiven by God. Perhaps that is what Matthew means in chapter 18 when Jesus implies that those who fail to forgive will not be forgiven. The language is strong, but I do not believe it is based on a vengeful god but on the reality that forgiveness, mercy, and grace are a two way street. We will know them to the extent that we practice them or are able to practice them. Forgiveness is a discipline. That means that if we work on it, we will get better at it. If we make excuses and give up the struggle, then we will fail and fall prey to bitterness and its twisted view of reality. We all need to hear this message.

Finally, regardless of our response to God and to our sisters and brothers, God is faithful. God is always faithful, even when our faith is weak and struggling—when we cannot see God's faithfulness or when we cannot share God's grace with others. Perhaps then, especially, God is faithful. The Father of the prodigal, when we are such, comes charging down the lane to embrace us and welcome us in love. God is always the first to take the step.