

**Sunday, March 10, 2013**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon - "Oh Brother!"**

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Forgiveness, in biblical terms, is a return to God.

The Bible is replete with stories and examples of forgiveness.

In Genesis, Jacob describes the forgiveness of his brother Esau after a long estrangement with these words: *"For to truly see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor."*

Many of the psalms beg for or report God's forgiveness as in today's psalm: *I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and you forgave the guilt of my sin;*

Jesus taught his followers to pray using the words, *"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors";*

And from the cross: *"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."*

The story of the prodigal son has been used throughout the ages, adapted to the conditions of the day, to make the point that we, like God, must engage in the most radical forgiveness we can imagine.

The story is so profound that it has been depicted in art, music, theater and literature.

A number of years ago I led a book discussion on Henri Nouwen's reflection on Rembrandt's painting, "Return of the Prodigal Son."

We followed the book discussion with a field trip to the Museum of Biblical Art in Manhattan to view an exhibit of 72 works of art depicting the parable of the Prodigal Son.

It was staggering to see.

I was particularly moved by a late 15<sup>th</sup> century wool and silk tapestry that illustrated the parable in various scenes arranged in small vignettes.

Throughout the narrative female figures were used to represent virtues and vices, alluding to the nature of the Prodigal's bad decisions.

Woven inscriptions labeling these figures helped the viewer to understand the precise lessons to be gleaned from twists and turns in the story.

For example, at the beginning the Prodigal's face was reflected in a mirror being held by a woman representing "Vanity."

Next, the son was seen collecting his wealth and handing it to a character representing "Extravagance."

Other figures who appear in the tapestry include: Obedience, Worldliness, Lust, Chastity, Venus-Goddess of beauty and love, Blindness of Mind, Love of Worldly Things, Flirtation, Self-Love, Wrath of God, Hunger, and Avarice.

The program from the museum explained that the weavers would fashion the cloth at the same time that they were making the design or image on it.

This complex technique was so painstaking that it could take a master weaver an entire 8-hour day to fashion a square inch. The tapestry was about 14x28 feet, representing approximately 55,000 square inches!

Imagine reflecting on the meaning of the Prodigal Son story all that time!

The tapestry helps us to realize that life is filled with temptations to turn away from God.

Just as there are many layers to sin – there are also many layers to forgiveness.

Though the dictionary lists forgiveness as a noun – I think we should think of it as a verb – an action – a way of life.

To truly forgive we must not just avert our gaze after a desultory “I’m sorry.”

We must embrace – just as Esau and the prodigal’s father embraced their kin.

We must cleanse our hearts of hatred, judgment and jealousy and offer the same mercy that we accept from God.

As you listen to this familiar story ask yourself, which person am I?

Are you the younger son – selfishly going out on your own, doing what you want with no regard to how other people might be affected?

Are you the type of person who is willing to take large risks, betting that things will turn out your way?

Are you able to ask for forgiveness – perhaps even beg for it, when you realize you have made a mistake?

The older son dutifully followed all of the rules.

He expected gratitude and respect for his hard work.

But again, as we have in earlier weeks, we come across someone whose anger is rooted in unspoken expectations.

His disappointment at his brother’s recognition comes from his own jealousy of having not been recognized.

Do you find something familiar in his story?

Are there times when you have worked hard on something and expected acknowledgement and not received it?

Did it leave you feeling angry?

Could you be the Father? Can love trump all?

Would you be able to embrace the son who hurt you, grateful that he is alive?

Of course, there is a bit of each of these characters in us – that is what makes the story so powerful.

We know that we could be the immature, irresponsible boy as well as the cranky, self-righteousness one.

We know that there are times when we can forgive and make up with an estranged friend or family member – or perhaps we have experienced someone gathering us in a forgiving embrace.

The question before us today, however, is not can we forgive, but what happens after we forgive?

How do we move from mercy to grace?

I like to imagine the next chapter in the Prodigal family's saga.

I like to think that the Father, after listening to his older son's lament, took him in his arms and said,

“Oh my son – my love for you is just as deep as my love for your brother.

I am blessed to have each of you as gifts from God in my life.

Know that I recognize and appreciate your gifts and give thanks to God each day that you are here.

Now let's go inside and welcome your brother home with hearts full of gratitude for all that we have and all that we are.”

I like to picture the two going into the feast and the brothers then embracing, like Jacob and Esau, their faces shining with love.

This is what forgiveness means – this is what family means.

Life is too short to hold grudges and judgments against people we were meant to love.

Our biblical stories provide us with a rich history of human brokenness.

We are privy to the lives of countless individuals who made the same mistakes that we make.

We are also provided with an ongoing narrative of God's mercy, forgiveness and grace.

These stories are our stories.

We must not distance ourselves from them.

We must look into their themes and find ourselves.

I came upon this little vignette in a newsletter this week:

It is a Spanish story of a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father.

On Saturday 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.

After forgiveness, comes reconciliation.

Reconciliation is "the changed relationship for the better between persons or groups who formerly were at enmity with each other."

Scripture encourages reconciliation between estranged parties, but also between God and humanity.

Much of the New Testament, certainly the writings of Paul, focus on humanity's reconciliation with God, through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Paul describes the human condition prior to reconciliation as weak, ungodly and sinful.

Through the death of God's son on the cross, God reconciled his relationship with humanity.

The immediate effect of this reconciliation is peace with God. Isn't that what we all seek?

Henri Nouwen ends his reflection on this parable concluding that he is called to be neither of the sons, but the Father.

He says:

*God's compassion is described by Jesus not simply to show me how willing God is to feel for me, or to forgive me my sins and offer me new life and happiness, but to invite me to become like God and to show the same compassion to others as he is showing to me. If the only meaning of the story were that people sin but God forgives, I could easily begin to think of my sins as a fine occasion for God to show me his forgiveness...The return to the Father is ultimately the challenge to become the Father...Being in the Father's house requires that I make the Father's life my own and become transformed in his image."*

So the story ends and we are reminded of Jesus' words:

*“Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.”*

We are called to forgive.

We are called to reconcile.

We are called to live out God’s love in all of our relationships and to let our faces shine with God’s glory.