

March 6, 2016
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Sermon “I’m Sorry, Forgive Me”

As I reflected on this passage, the Prodigal Son, I kept returning to a point I made in last Sunday’s sermon:

“It is easier to offer forgiveness than to seek forgiveness.”

Our biblical family today – the father and his two sons are caught in this dilemma.

The prodigal son, in his own internal dialogue, acknowledges his mistake and decides that he will humble himself and seek his father’s forgiveness.

I can imagine him travelling back home, rehearsing his words of apology.

However, when he arrives, he doesn’t have to utter those words because his father, overcome with love for his son, simply embraces him – sending the clear message that all is well –

I forgive you.

Have you ever experienced that type of unconditional love – a bear hug of acceptance that just makes you feel that everything will be all right?

Henri Nouwen described his response to such love this way:

“I have been led to an inner place where I had not been before.

It is the place within me where God has chosen to dwell.

It is the place where I am held safe in the embrace of an all-loving father who calls me by name and says, “You are my beloved son, on you my favor rests.”

It is the place where I can taste the joy and the peace that are not of this world.

This place had always been there. I had always been aware of it as the source of grace...I am God’s home!”

I am God’s Home.

A place for God to dwell.

A place to feel safe.

A place to feel loved.

We all seek such a home.

We are most comfortable when we are home.

Nouwen continues:

“I leave home every time I lose faith in the voice that calls me the Beloved and follow the voices that offer a great variety of ways to win the love I so much desire...

When I forget that voice of the first unconditional love, then these innocent suggestions can easily start dominating my life and pull me into the ‘distant country.’

Anger, resentment, jealousy, desire for revenge, lust, greed, antagonisms and rivalries are the obvious signs that I have left home.”

Our second brother, the dutiful one who has served his father well over the years has left this home.

He has abandoned his God-center and succumbed to the demons of anger and resentment.

The father responds again with love, gently coaxing him back to his home.

When have you heard the voice of unconditional love?

How often are you that voice?

I remember when my Uncle Jack died I said to Joe, “there is one less person in the world who loves me unconditionally.”

One less person who would run out to greet me, embrace me, welcome me no matter what I had done.

We need such love.

God provides this.

God is ever present, waiting to welcome us with open arms, to embrace us and call us beloved.

Where did you find yourself in the story?

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.

Here we are exposed to 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 triumph over disappointment?

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.

I read a small book this week called *The Art of Forgiveness*.

It was published by the World Council of Churches 20 years ago and looks at the scriptural basis for forgiveness.

The author, German theologian Geiko Muller-Fahrenhholz, laments that forgiveness has become a cheap notion in its triteness and its inconsequentiality.

“We’ve come to say “I’m sorry” or “Excuse me” for so many trifling things in everyday life that we no longer even wait for pardon. We take it for granted.”

I have noticed this abundant use of ‘I’m sorry’ recently.

It is the way that many people start sentences...I’m sorry to interrupt; I’m sorry to be late; I’m sorry I didn’t do what I said I would.... Forgiveness is expected – taken for granted.

The book’s author suggests that it now costs so little to say “I’m sorry” that we have lost the ability to ascertain how to avoid situations for which we need to excuse ourselves.”

Our Christian faith, however, is a religion centered on forgiveness.

We must not take lightly our responsibility to forgive.

The bible understands forgiveness as a process that includes both a victim and a perpetrator; a release from bondage, the remission of debt, guilt or punishment.

When forgiveness takes place, both sides are changed by the encounter.

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

Forgiveness is only a first step, though.

Reconciliation comes next.

How do we reconcile – rebuild what has been broken?

How do we move from mercy to grace?

While the bible contains multiple examples of forgiveness, there are few examples of reconciliation between people.

Muller-Farenholz argues that reconciliation is strictly the work of God.

“Human beings are granted reconciliation from God.”

Relationships are rebuilt and restored by God’s grace alone.

When we think of the story of the Prodigal Son we often forget the reconciliation aspect between the brothers.

We focus on the forgiveness of the father, and the restoration of the prodigal son, but we miss the fact that the two brothers had to learn to find each other again – to rebuild their home together.

This cannot have been an easy task.

The brother who had remained at home would now have to split some of his inheritance with his returned brother who had lost everything.

He would have to share his life and his work with his brother.

His resentment is natural and understandable.

This brother had to face the questions of how much he valued his prodigal brother, how much was he willing to sacrifice for reconciliation, and how much would he rather be right than be in relationship.

No doubt, it must have been a tough choice.

The Gospel does not tell us what he finally decided to do.

We are left to decide for ourselves the appropriate response in such a situation.

But we are also left with the knowledge that faced with similar circumstances we would need to rely on God’s grace and the Holy Spirit’s assistance to open our arms wide and embrace this brother.

Sometimes, the brother is us.

Forgiving ourselves for our shortcomings, mistakes and brokenness can be more difficult than forgiving others.

Going back to the question of whether it is easier to offer forgiveness or seek forgiveness – think for a moment how you treat yourself.

Can you embrace your own inadequacies and bestow God’s love upon yourself.

Can you call yourself ‘beloved’?

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not meant to be easy.

To truly clear your heart of malice, hurt, jealousy, envy, resentment – this is hard work, regardless of the target.

The good news is that God is ever present to help us.

Our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith ends with these beautiful words:

You promise to all who trust you:

Forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,

Courage in the struggle for justice and peace,

Your presence in trial and rejoicing,

And eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you.

Amen.