

Forgiving as a Practice of Faith
Luke 15:11-13, 17a, 18-32
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Heather Leslie Hammer

Last week we started a story, but we didn't finish it. It was the story of "The Prodigal Son," where the wayward son comes home, confesses his sins, expresses his contrition, and offers to do penance for his behavior. We all know this story, how then the father runs to welcome his son home, and sends his servants running to slaughter and roast the fatted calf.

It's a bit surprising, isn't it? this ending? If your son had been gone for months or years, had squandered all you had given him, had gone against all your values, and had come home penniless, would you have thrown him a party? Would you have welcomed him back? Or would you have held on to your anger as the older brother did? Of course we don't know how much the father knew—I don't think the father and son had been "texting" or communicating by e-mail—in fact, it seems the son's departure cut off all communication. But the family seemed to have heard by word of mouth that the younger son had "devoured [the father's] property with prostitutes." That was how the older brother put it. The way the father put it was to say that his son had been "lost." There had been a rift in the family; the younger son had walked away. He had abandoned the family and their values. When he left it was for the father as if the son had died.

Of course the older brother saw things differently. He judged his younger brother as unworthy. He was jealous of the attention his father lavished on him, giving him new clothes and preparing a feast in his honor, when *he* had been the good and faithful son, and yet had received no reward.

Things are a bit different today in America than in 1st century Palestine. Back then and there, the normal thing to do was to stay home and work on the farm, like the older brother did. For families today in our communities, the normal thing to do is to leave home after high school or community college. And yet today it's quite common to find the "wayward" son living at home. And that can have its problems. When our oldest child came home to live, at the age of 25, it was awkward. He was no longer a child, and yet he was not an independent adult either. It was a challenge to know what expectations to set. Should we demand that he move out, in so many months? Should we demand that he get a job? Should we demand that he eat with us? Do chores? Tell us where he was going and when he would be home? Should we demand that he see a doctor if he was ill? In our case, our son had a mental illness—should we have demanded that he take medication?

Our culture teaches young people to grow up and leave home. Be independent. Be successful. Make something of yourself! The Jewish culture in rural Palestine taught people to take care of their elders, support the family, and give the village a good name. Our cultural expectations are different then and now. And yet, in each context, success is

quite clearly defined. For the brothers in the prodigal-son story, success was measured in working for the father and then earning one's fair inheritance. For young people today, success is measured in achieving a career and financial independence. The child who does not follow the expected path of success in either culture is a misfit.

This is why the father's response in the prodigal-son story is such a surprise. He seems to be rewarding failure. No wonder the older brother is jealous.

But the critical point is the connection between repentance and forgiveness. The prodigal son had a change of heart; that's why he came home. He told his father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (verses 18-19). He was even willing to work as his father's hired hand.

The son recognized that he had been pursuing a path of failure. He wanted to change. In a sense, he wanted to begin again. And the father wanted that too.

Is it that easy? This bible story is overly simplified. After all, it's a parable. This series of events didn't ever really happen. I think families are very complicated, and forgiveness is often very hard to come by. Most say the parable is about God's forgiveness, and I'd say that is true. But I would also like to think that such forgiveness is possible in families.

I guess the question is, how do we begin again in a relationship? It takes imagination; that's what Dr. Gregory Jones says, Dean of Duke Divinity School. He writes,

"Forgiveness works through our ongoing willingness to *give up* certain claims against one another, to *give the truth* when we assess our relationships with one another, and to *give gifts* of ourselves by making innovative gestures that offer a future not bound by the past. Being forgiven requires an ongoing willingness to honor a new claim that has been made on us, to speak with a new truthfulness, and to live in a new way with one another" (in *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed., "Forgiveness," L. Gregory Jones, 135).

There is a lot of "giving" in this definition: *giving up* claims, *giving* the truth, and *giving* gifts of ourselves in order to begin again. Forgiveness is generous. And forgiveness is not a quick, once-and-for-all event. It is more a way of life. In the case of, say—a child who lives at home, causing conflict in spite of parental expectations—, this author suggests that forgiveness is a "dance"—sometimes with awkward steps, but steps forward nevertheless. He suggests:

1. "We become willing to speak truthfully and patiently about the conflicts that have arisen.
2. We acknowledge both the existence of anger and bitterness and a desire to overcome them.
3. We summon up a concern for the well-being of the other as a child of God.
4. We recognize our own complicity in conflict, remember that we have been forgiven in the past, and take the step of repentance.
5. We make a commitment to struggle to change whatever caused and continues to perpetuate our conflicts.
6. We confess our yearning for the possibility of reconciliation. (138-139).

Gregory Jones is talking about forgiveness as a 2-way street. Both parties are involved. In this case, instead of a quick fix, perhaps forgiveness is a long-range goal. Jesus uses the word “forgive” only when the wrongdoer has actually repented, as in the Prodigal Son. (Jesus talks a lot about loving your enemy, but when he says “forgive” it is in the context of repentance.) Full, 2-way forgiveness may not be possible when a person shows no remorse. When the conditions of repentance have been fulfilled, with confession, contrition, and penance, the person who has been wronged may choose to forgive in order to restore the relationship and be reconciled. However, if the person in the wrong does *not* repent, the other may want to release the offender from anger and resentment but not attempt to restore the relationship or experience true reconciliation. I’d call this release, or one-way forgiveness, but not complete forgiveness. (In my talks with folks in our spirituality groups this week, I realize people have different definitions of forgiveness. For some, forgiveness can be a one-way overture.)

If you find yourself in a broken relationship — perhaps in a situation of abuse or crime or in a case of unfairness or dishonesty, it may be impossible for you to forgive the person from whom you are estranged. If the person who has wronged you has not confessed fault, has not expressed the wrongfulness of the act, and has not been willing to demonstrate in his or her actions a new attitude of repentance, then the words, “I forgive you,” could be just words, nothing more. But if the words help you release your anger toward the person, they may be helpful. You may be able to restore your own life, even if you are unable to restore the other’s life.

Though we should make every effort to pave the way for forgiveness and reconciliation, there may be times when the person in the wrong makes no effort to set things right. What do we do then? Flora Wuellner, suggests that we come to Christ and ask that he stand between us and the person who has not repented. She writes:

For myself, I ask the living, healing Jesus Christ to stand between me and a person who may hurt or drain me, ministering to that person in the way he or she most needs. I do not feel separated from the other person, but I know that the Christ, not I, is the source of life, the healing fountain for all of us. I sense then the tendrils of need and hunger going into the heart of the Christ who can comfort and feed. This is not only a picture prayer for the needs of the other person but also a prayer of shelter for me, so that I will not be drained or invaded by the need of the other (in “Living as Whole Persons Among the Unreconciled” in *Forgiveness, the Passionate Journey*, 136-137).

Wuellner describes a release that can distance you from the pain and give you a kind of buffer zone.

I invite you to give this a try: When you recognize that you are at fault, ask for forgiveness by confessing, expressing your sorrow, and taking action to make amends. Then accept God’s grace and forgive yourself. But when someone you care about who has hurt you fails to express to you confession, contrition, and penance, even when you have extended the invitation, then ask the Holy Spirit to stand between you and the person to bring healing

and provide shelter. Let me know how it works.

Well, what about the older brother? How does the story end for him? I hope he sees modeled his father's forgiveness as a generous, loving act. I hope he learns from it, that in life not everything is equal, but God's love is unconditional; it is lavish, and unearned. I think that is the lesson for the older brother. One author said, the younger son learns to say "Father," and the older son learns to say "brother" (Alan Culpepper, in an article by Robert Dunham, see http://day1.org/1759-which_comes_first_grace_or_repentance).

A few years ago we attended the wedding of the daughter of a close friend. My friend had shared with me the fact that her daughter's husband-to-be had been, in his words, "abandoned" by his father as a toddler. His mother was single for a long time and then remarried, and he had no contact with his birth father throughout his growing up. When the young couple became engaged, the husband-to-be tried to find his birth father. Finally, the week before the wedding, he located his father and went to meet him. The father and his new family cordially greeted the son, and the son invited his father and family to his wedding, and they accepted the invitation with some nervousness, but with joy. The situation was a bit peculiar, because the father had been completely out of the picture for some 25 years. But when he showed up at the wedding everyone was glad to see him. My friend, the mother of the bride, was a little unsure where to seat the father at the dinner party, so she seated him next to me. Jim and I had the honor to talk with him and see him beam with great pride at his son's wedding.

Here the son offered forgiveness to the prodigal father. Here the father learned to say "son." It is never too late to forgive and to love again. Perhaps there is a person in your life who comes to mind today, someone you can forgive, perhaps someone you need to forgive.