

## Forgiveness and Power

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Luke 15:11-32

*So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, '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.'"*

The younger, prodigal son sat there in the fields, with the swine, reflecting on his recent past. There was a famine in the land. He was hungry, and no one gave him anything. By all accounts, his days of having things given to him were over. It was then that he came to his senses. No one knows why. Perhaps he really had learned from his experience, his rapid descent from riches to rags. Perhaps he was out of options, other than the one he chose, which was to go home, apologize to his father, and ask to be one of his hired hands.

Upon returning to the farm, he was hardly expecting a warm, joyous homecoming, yet even he was shocked by just how cold his father was towards him, which began when after a long silence, punctuated only by deep sighs, before his father slowly said, "Well, well, well. Look who has showed up. Why are *you* here?"

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

There was more silence, then, “Well, at least you learned *something* while you were out there, wasting the family fortune and destroying the family name.”

His father did take him back, but he took him as a hired hand, and he treated him as one. He was forced to live in the servant’s quarters, a far cry from the relative luxury of the farm house, and he was never allowed in the family home again. The other servants mocked and ridiculed him, especially in the evenings when the sounds and smells of large family meals would make their way to where the servants slept. Sometimes the only consolation for the son was the fact that he now had to go to bed so early, because the days began so early, hours before sunrise.

However, his dealings with his older brother were the worst. His father, as a form of perpetual punishment had made the older brother the direct supervisor of the younger brother, which meant the younger son always received the worst tasks, the longest workdays, and the blame for each and every thing that went wrong around the farm.

As time passed, his father would eventually speak to him, but he was always terse, unwilling to let go of what he described as the misfortunes of the family and the farm, all of which were somehow connected to the past, poor choices of the younger son, who would die and old, hired hand on the farm, likely working for his father, brother, and eventually, his nephew, because the inheritance his father had set aside to care for him in his old age was gone forever.

Clearly (and thankfully) this is not how the story ends. You know this. It is doubtful that we would remember this story after two thousand years if it had, and it is impossible to imagine Jesus telling the story any other way than how he did. On my best days, I can believe that I

would behave as the father did in Luke's telling of the story and not my telling of the story, mainly because I know how I love my children.

However, I believe that there is something very familiar in my telling of the end of the story, because it is rooted in the human condition, specifically our attachment to power, and this morning I am going to explain why I believe that forgiveness and power are intrinsically linked, and why, if we are to do what Rev. Wright said last week, to forgive in such a way that we treat the other as though the offense had never happened, we must liberate forgiveness from the entanglements of power.

Jesus gives us this parable soon after hearing the scribes and Pharisees complain that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. Jesus begins telling stories about people finding things they had lost: a shepherd with one hundred sheep loses one, but rejoices when he finds it. A woman with ten silver coins loses one and searches her entire house until she finds it. Then, Jesus tells us this morning's story, similar to the other lost-and-found stories, but different. This time, it is not sheep and coins that are lost, but a person, a child of man, and a child of God.

However, the story of the prodigal son is more complicated than the other two parables that Jesus tells. No one blames the sheep for wandering off, and no one blames a coin for becoming lost. However, when it comes to asking for your inheritance early (which is a bit presumptuous to begin with), and then wasting it on selfish, licentious living, we are talking about an entirely different kind of lost-and-found altogether.

The reason the father gets it so right in Jesus' version of the story is because his forgiveness is so complete. He could have forgiven his son and then taken him on as a hired hand, but for the father, forgiveness, was not about a new relationship dominated by a power dynamic where because of the sins of the son, the father had something to forever hold over the

head of his son. In Jesus' telling, the father relinquishes the power that comes when you have something to hold over someone's head, and in so doing restores his son to the fullness of life, as Rev. Wright discussed last week.

And we consider that this parable is about learning to forgive others as God forgives us, we are reminded that there is no greater illustration of the relinquishing of power than the God who created the universe and everything in it, scourged, mocked, naked and dying on the cross.

When I was in my early teens, a member of my family said something about me that I found particularly dreadful. I discovered it because I overheard the conversation. This person never knew what I knew, because I did not want to have *that* conversation, but I held on to that anger, stored it away, and every time I was mean or hurtful to that person and later felt regretful for how I had acted, I went down to my storeroom and I remembered that wound, that anger, and I thought about it, savored it, until I stopped feeling remorseful for how I had just behaved.

That anger I held so tightly was nothing other than the byproduct of my refusal to forgive this person. It was toxic waste, and it was killing me slowly from the inside. Yet, it didn't feel like toxic waste. It felt like a balm to soothe my conscience. It made me feel like no matter who was dealing the cards, I was always holding the ace of spades. It allowed me to become 008. It was my license to kill. It perfectly suited and enabled my sinful, base desires for punishment and revenge, and until I let go of that desire for power over this other person, that toxic waste continued to rot my soul, one rationalization at a time.

In 1992, lawyer and writer Wendy Kaminer published a book titled *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions*, and in it, she argues that we live in a culture of victimhood where whoever can claim to be the greatest victim wins. This is the other problem that arises when we cling so tightly to power in all of its many

forms: we allow the sin perpetrated against us to define us and keep us in a state of almost perpetual victimhood. We even think that if we forgive someone, we are granting them some kind of liberation that they do not deserve, as if we are at once the offended party, the judge, and the jailer.

We may even believe that what has been done to us somehow grants us an exemption from God's commandments regarding forgiveness and reconciliation, because, come on, God does not *really* expect us to forgive *everything*, right?

But there you have it, and our God is indeed a God who has a heart for the victim, a heart for those in need, a heart for the oppressed, and Jesus came not only to liberate us from the oppression of the other; Jesus came also to give us means and an example to give and receive grace, so that we do not continue, sometimes without realizing it, to victimize *ourselves*.

It sounds trite to say it, but forgiveness really does mean letting go, including the power and the one-upsmanship that holding on to anger and bitterness allows us to take on the *form* of forgiveness, but ultimately leaves our hearts unchanged. Our call as disciples of the wounded healer is not to beat our wounds into weapons, but to release to God all of the injustice, all of the pain, all of the sadness, all of the hurt, all of the wrecked memories, and all of the anger; to lay them all at the foot of the cross, to let Christ bear them for now, and to do so trusting that the resistance that we feel when we push against forgiveness and push against reconciliation, is the God who has let go of all of our sins, the God who'se will it is for all of God's lost children to have abundant life, pushing back.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.