

Parable of Forgiveness: Paradigm of Freedom

Luke 15:11-32

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Last year during Lent, Donna asked the children to look at our Lenten banners and share what they saw. Before other children even had a chance to form their thoughts, one boy shouted out: Rock Man! I see Rock Man! There's beauty and irony in the boy's exclamation the "Rock Man" being Jesus' the rock of our salvation! If Jesus is the "who" of our salvation, the "what" is forgiveness. In Lent, as we prepare for the fullest celebration of Easter, we are to examine ourselves and our relationship to both the "who" and the "what." In Luke's gospel we have an instrument to help us in this examination; we have the premier parable of forgiveness.

Familiar to us, it has been called the parable of the prodigal son, the parable of the forgiving father and the parable of the grudging brother. We've just heard the story but let me loosely paraphrase the main points. A father has two sons. One asks for his inheritance...side note: by asking in that culture, he was wishing that his father was already dead for an inheritance would never be shared before death. The father gives the son what he wants. The son goes away and lives "high on the hog"...then plummets to the despicable duty of feeding the pigs: the worse kind of work for a Jewish person. He gets knocked in the head with a corn cob...as an insight stirs him to repentance..."even his father's hired hands have more than he does!" He decides to return home...his father is watching for him, waiting for him, the father runs and embraces him with a hug, and gifts that symbolize significant things: a robe, dignity; a ring, authority; and sandals, freedom...for slaves would not have shoes! Out working, the older brother hears the commotion, "hey, what's going on here...I'm out doing my job and you're throwing him a party!" Finally, the parable whichever perspective you take, the prodigal son, the forgiving father or the grudging brother ends with the father asking the older son to see it his way.

I've played lightheartedly with the parable but this is a serious matter. This parable of forgiveness is a paradigm for freedom. In it we have three obvious components of living the forgiven and forgiving life: 1. Forgiveness from God 2. Forgiveness of self and 3. Forgiveness of others. And there is a fourth area of forgiveness that we will look at that isn't covered in the paradigm but we would be amiss not to name it.

First, the forgiveness from God is the basis of our Christian faith, through Jesus the rock of our salvation. But because we don't like talking about our weaknesses or failures and don't even mention the word "sins," we can miss the power of God's forgiveness in our lives. For example, I had a person once leave a church I was serving because I wouldn't take out the prayer of confession from the worship service! Paul tells us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God [Romans 3:23]. Calvin preached the condition of total depravity, that human beings are completely sinful...not "good news." We may not agree with Calvin...but it's hard to argue with Paul on this point. But there is a difference between guilt and shame. We feel guilty for what we do or don't do; we feel shame for who we are. We have no reason to feel shame...we are the beloved children of God, in baptism God claims us as God's own. However, as beloved children we are to honestly recognize our true selves and that must include that we make mistakes...that we sin, and it's only by God's grace that we can be forgiven and freed from the power of sin in our lives. Only with that acknowledgment will the warm embrace of the loving parent and the gifts of dignity, authority and freedom be fully received.

Second in the paradigm of freedom is forgiveness of self. The younger son represents human arrogance and pride, selfishness and self-indulgence, the disregard of others' feelings and disrespect of relationships. The younger son represents the need of many to hit "bottom" before we can "come to our senses" and see that decisions we've made are not life giving, but in fact, they are killing us. The younger son shows us that coming to our senses, means humbly embracing our humanity...that we've made mistakes...and we can begin to set things right.

The forgiveness of self is an ongoing struggle for many. Sin affects every aspect of our lives, mental, emotional, physical and spiritual. We can experience a decline in our health and quality of life...when we refuse to forgive ourselves but perhaps we don't know what to do about it. There are counselors and therapists there to help us with some aspects but the parable shows us that we are to return to God. But sometimes, for whatever reasons, we aren't able to do that initially so what are our options, another scripture tells us, "to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another that we may be healed." Naming the truth about ourselves defuses the power of sin in our lives and begins to free us in every way.

Third in the paradigm of freedom is forgiveness of others. The older son gives us an opportunity to look at the forgiveness of others not with a model to follow but certainly with attitudes and actions we understand! The older son was doing what he was supposed to do, what he had always done...worked for the father. This many of us can relate to...doing what were suppose to do...in following God...in our life's work. And just like we don't know if the older son is motivated by love, obedience, or hope for a reward of riches...we may not be clear on our own motivations. We hold onto grudges. And just like the older son, when things don't go our way, in his case, the return of the younger son, we get angry. Anger is a block to forgiveness. One theologian has identified four types of anger: irritation, frustration, hostility and rage.¹ These are easily identified in our own lives and in the lives of others...even in the lives of countries just as we can clearly see them in the older son.

The older son does not give us a model to follow but we do have models of forgiveness of others that lead to freedom. Two recent ones come to mind, one an individual and another a country. Jackie Millar has been speaking around Madison in recent months sharing her terrorizing story of being shot in the head execution style, her survival, and then her forgiveness of her attackers. And it's hard to find a country's more courageous example than the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after the ending of apartheid in the early 1990's. In his book No Future Without Forgiveness, Bishop Desmond Tutu says, "God wants to show us that there is life after conflict and repression, that because of forgiveness there is a future."² Another theologian has said, "That forgiveness is power; it can heal both the forgiver and the forgiven. In fact, it could change the world if we allowed it to."³ The older son at the time of the story did not allow it to. We may not have the strength of Jackie Millar and we may be frustrated with countries continuing to practice policies and procedures that are unjust but we can examine ourselves and explore possibilities of forgiveness that lead to freedom, individually and communally. However, we must remember that confronting a conflict doesn't always mean repairing a relationship. Forgiveness doesn't always lead to reconciliation...but it always leads to freedom for the forgiver.

Finally, the fourth area of forgiveness that we will look at that isn't covered in the paradigm is our forgiving God. This may sound heretical but it's a reality for many. For example, when I was covering as the chaplain at a local hospital a mother of an eighteen year old who had just died in a motor vehicle accident began attacking me in the ER...hitting me, yelling

at me, “God, I hate you. I hate you.” I knew that my collar represented to her the God that she was so angry with...the only thing I could do was to wrap my arms around her in a warm embrace until her pounding became sobs of pain. When things happen to us and to those we love and we don’t know who to blame, who to be angry with, we often direct that anger towards God. Many are angry because they get a disease, or a marriage falls apart, or a child dies, or a crime happens to them or their country is being destroyed. Many people have left the church because they believe God has let them down. Many people have turned away from God living life their own way...whether it’s like the younger son or the older son...they are a part from a loving relationship with God. But in the premier parable of forgiveness we do have the pinnacle of God’s response...God is watching for us and God is waiting for us to return...so that God can embrace us and give us the gifts that are ours as God’s beloved children...the gift of freedom in living the forgiven and forgiving life.

It’s impossible to cover the complexities of forgiveness in one sermon, perhaps we can’t even do it in one lifetime. This morning, we’ve looked at one parable of forgiveness as paradigm of freedom. As you came in, you were offered a rock with the word “forgiveness” on it. In the next three weeks, from now until Easter, I invite you to keep your rock in a prominent place; a pocket, a purse, a backpack, a dresser, a desk, a shelf, somewhere you will see it daily to remind you of the four aspects of forgiveness...forgiveness from God, forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of God. Let our rocks encourage us to examine our lives and to continue the work of forgiveness that may need to take place. Which area do we need to grow in? Perhaps your rock will come to represent a person you need to forgive or a person that you need forgiveness from. And if that doesn’t work for you, let your rock remind you of the “Rock Man” Jesus’ the rock of our salvation! Remembering if Jesus is the “who” of our salvation, the “what” is forgiveness...and the “why” is freedom to live the forgiven and forgiving life! Amen

1. Marjorie Thompson, *The Way of Forgiveness* (Upper Room Books, Nashville, TN)
2. Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 120
3. Johann C. Arnold, *Why Forgive?* (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2000) , 1