

THE PRODIGAL FATHER
Luke 15:11-32
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 10, 2013

It's easy to forgive when someone wrongs you terribly but not only humbles him or herself and asks for forgiveness but also makes good on his word to make restitution. It's also easy to forgive when you yourself wronged someone the same way you were wronged so putting yourself in the other's place, unless you're a hypocrite, you have no choice but to forgive.

Then there're the times when forgiveness is hard, if not impossible because you were wounded so deeply you never really recovered. Worse, if the one who destroyed your life never asks for forgiveness, how can you forgive someone who never acknowledges doing anything wrong?

The 2005 TV Show Time movie, *Our Fathers*, tells the sad and sordid story of the systematic cover ups of the clergy sex abuse scandals that have damaged the Church in this generation more than anything else I can think of.

Now adults, these victims of clergy abuse formed a support group that met regularly to help each other come to terms with what was done to them.

One of these victims told the group he searched for and found the priest who molested some of them, dying in a hospital, plugged into a life support machine. Then and there the victim confronted his predator, expressing his hatred towards him, letting the priest know what he did to him and the others was criminal. But then unexpectedly, out of the blue the younger man said something totally unexpected. He said to his abuser, "I want you to forgive me for the hatred I've had for you. I believe, Father, the promise Jesus made to us is true." He then took the dying man's hand and prayed for his healing and salvation.

How hard it must have been for that younger man, not only forgive his abuser but also ask him for forgiveness. Likewise, how hard was it for God, not to damn but forgive his son's abusers when they crucified him on Good Friday?

Jesus taught we've been created to love God and each other, but that ability to love is undermined by our insane determination to go our

own way despite the destructive consequences. Like Humpty Dumpty, our broken relationship have to be put back together again, but it'll take more than the best efforts of "all the king's horses and all the king's men" to repair what we've broken. That can only come from above. Only God can make reconciliation possible, but only you and I can make forgiveness probable by doing what we need to do to complete the process.

This is borne out in another of Jesus' teachings, "So, when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24)

Today's sermon is based on Jesus' parable about the broken relationships between a father, his younger prodigal son and his older dutiful son. By the way, do you know the definition of the word prodigal? I looked it up. 1) Rashly, recklessly extravagant 2) Giving or given in abundance; lavish or profuse. The younger son proved to be just that the way he spent Daddy's money, but maybe the extravagance we should focus on is the father's extravagant love he lavished on the both of his sons, even though neither really deserved it.

Jesus told this parable in response to the growing controversy between himself and the members of the religious establishment who were apoplectic because Jesus was keeping company with the prodigal irreligious folks causing the dutiful religious folks to grumble, "This fellow welcomes tax collectors and sinners."

Hoping the Pharisees would join him to celebrate these sinners' homecoming, Jesus told two stories about being lost and found; first the parable of the lost sheep quickly followed by the parable of the lost coin. Both parables stressed the point that when something precious is lost and suddenly found, it is cause for celebration.

Obviously the lesson was lost on the Pharisees, primarily because of their self-righteous thinking. Listen to them saying, "Jesus, we spend our entire lives working hard for God, and suddenly these Johnny come latelies come strolling by and you treat them like long lost brothers. What's wrong with this picture, Jesus?"

Sensing he wasn't getting through, Jesus gave it one more try, telling the parable about God's desire for the Pharisees to have good

relationships, not just with God and each other, but even with tax collectors and sinners.

Here's my modern rendition of Jesus' parable: A young man tired of living down on the farm wants to leave as soon as possible, if not sooner. He goes to his father and basically says, "I can't wait for you to die so give me what's coming to me right now so I can get out of here and live my own life." Obliging the old man divided the property and after converting his new found wealth into cash, the boy quickly jetted off to Las Vegas where he blows his inheritance doing all the things every young man wants to do but shouldn't.

Then one morning awakened by the hotel manager, the Prodigal is told "Your bill is over due and the party's over." Suddenly, with no money, all his fair weather friends disappear and he's left alone, out on the street. To make matters worse, a recession hits and he can't find a job except as a pig farmer. Being a Jewish boy raised "Kosher," he suddenly realized he hit bottom and has no alternative but to return home, beg his father's forgiveness and work as a hired hand.

Like the tax collectors and sinners who came to Jesus, the boy's sorrow was obviously genuine because he was prepared to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son, treat me like your hired hands."

Now here's why I've retitled this the Parable of the Prodigal Father. It turns out the old man spent his days wandering back and forth on the road to the farm waiting for his son to return, when, in the distance, he sees his lost boy coming home. Unexpectedly, the old man did what every proud Jewish patriarch never did in public. Instead of waiting for his son to crawl back to him, he abandoned protocol, hiked up his robe, exposing his bare legs, dashed up to his son, flung his arms around him and kissed him.

Before the boy could recite his heartfelt confession, the Father proclaimed a celebration in his son's honor. As far as the old man was concerned, the son's sins were forgiven and their relationship was fully restored.

Extravagant, reckless, love poured out on an extravagant, reckless sinner! "Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again!" ...

But that's not the end of it. To completely bridge the gap, the older, dutiful son needed to be included in the reconciliation process, but he was far from ready.

Returning from still another hard day of back-breaking work the dutiful son grumbled (like the Pharisees) when he found out what just happened. Refusing to join the celebration, the Father again humbled himself and went out pleading for the older boy to come in. Instead the old man got an earful. "Listen, every day I broke my back for you. I did everything you told me, never once complaining about anything. And what thanks did I get? Apparently being faithful and obedient isn't good enough. Maybe I should have run off and splurged all your money like that worthless, reckless good-for-nothing son of yours. What's wrong with this picture, Dad? Why are you rewarding him for hurting us both?"

Listen carefully to the Father's heartfelt response. "Son, you are always with me. You haven't lost anything and nothing's changed. Please, come with me and celebrate your brother's homecoming. Since everything I have is still yours, we both, together, must love and care for him, because we're all he's got."

Interesting point. The Father said, "Everything I have is yours." In other words, the younger son isn't getting any more inheritance, so now he's dependant on the Father, and after he dies, the older brother. So the Father was really saying to the dutiful son, "Please, for my sake, forgive your brother and take him back into the family. He needs you now more than ever. Love and forgive him, as I've always loved and forgiven you."

I'll say it again, the only way you can measure the quality of your relationship with God is by the way we treat one another. The point Jesus made through this parable is clear: God wanted the Pharisees to forgive and take back into the family their younger brothers, the tax collectors and sinners who were coming to their senses and wanting to restore their relationship with both God and their older brothers. How else could the Pharisees possibly honor the first and greatest commandment if they wouldn't honor God's request? Unfortunately, most of the Pharisees refused to listen.

Don't let that happen to you! The health of your soul depends on it, as well as the spiritual health of those who are coming to their senses and coming home to God, because they're hoping God loves and

forgives extravagantly through his family, the People of God, the Church of Christ, you and me! If we fail at this, we're all lost.

Here's an image to take home with you today. Imagine sitting around a big dinner table with Jesus a motley crew of prodigal sinners who came looking for Jesus because they have come to their senses and desire to come home to God's family. Your first reaction is to recoil because they're the people you wouldn't want your children to be around, even with supervision. But Jesus says, "Hi, I was hoping you'd drop in. Come and meet our new friends. They need our support."

Will you pull up a chair or will you pull away?