

Sermon

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Proper 6 (C): 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15; Psalm 32; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

My paternal grandmother is my last living grandparent. As such she is now the *de facto* keeper of the family stories. She has troves of them. So many, that I spent some time a couple of years ago helping her collect those stories into a memoir. I'd heard some of them before, but there were a number in that collection that surprised me, none more so than this one.

It was the early 1940's and my great grandfather, never having recovered from the Great Depression, was in financial difficulty. He was a dentist who had lost his wife a few years earlier and the compounding stress of being in debt and the grief of losing a spouse had taken its toll on him. I'll let my grandmother take it from there:

*One morning he was sitting alone at his desk in his dental office when he had an unexpected visitor. The owner of the Lorain Avenue property, having realized that my father could never pay off the debt, came to release him from the years' long mortgage...My father, sitting alone, freed from the debt he'd endured for so many years, slumped in his chair. A blood clot, released by the rush of relief, had reached the brain and ended his life.*

This is, obviously a tragic story. And when I first heard it, I was taken aback by the abruptness of my great-grandfather's demise. But it is also one of the most powerful examples of the liberating force of forgiveness that I have ever heard. It literally released my great-grandfather from his burden, his debts were forgiven him and he could die in peace. The "rush of relief" that killed him was also a gracious gift. Forgiveness is a powerful thing.

Forgiveness is also a mysterious thing, because what is it exactly? Is it an action? A feeling? A little bit of both, perhaps. It's probably easier to say what it is not: it's not forgetting. It's also not holding a grudge. It doesn't have to result in you liking the person, you forgive, but you do have to find some kind of compassion for them. But none of this tells us what happens when forgiveness occurs. And yet we know both sides of it, holding the power to offer forgiveness and being in need of it from someone else. Yet I couldn't give you a definition that encompasses all that it entails.

As many of you know we are preparing to take a group of 30 people from St. John's to South Africa next February. And one of our main tasks while we are there will be to try and learn how forgiveness is possible in the face of the unspeakable hatred, violence and oppression that existed during the era of Apartheid. How is forgiveness possible after so much blood has been shed and so many lives ruined? How does it work, such that reconciliation and hope are possible? I don't know. This remains a holy mystery to me. That's why I'm excited about going.

How forgiveness works is not just a mystery in post-Apartheid South Africa, though. It is a mystery at all times and in all place because ultimately, forgiveness is an act of God

and thus defies tidy definitions or explanation. When one person forgives another they are channeling the power of the Spirit to overcome their pain and hurt, or their desire to be vindictive. When we forgive we are brushing the face of God. And when we are forgiven, we are feeling, however slightly, the gracious love of God. For after all, our ability to forgive is grounded in the forgiveness we have been given in the life and death of Jesus Christ. The absolute forgiveness proffered to us by a God whose love for us is so extravagant that it overcomes even our worst sins. I know clichés can be trite, but they’re often true: to err is human, and to forgive truly is divine.

But there is one condition that we receive God’s forgiveness that is so freely given to us. And that is that we know enough to ask for it. The offer is there, the forgiveness has been extended, but we don’t receive it unless we recognize our need for it. Our readings this week make this point exactly. First we have David, glorious King David, a man above reproach and full of faith. But one day he happened to spy a woman named Bathsheba bathing and he became enamored of her. David exercises his power as King to have Bathsheba brought to him and he gets to know her, in the biblical sense, getting her pregnant. So he arranges to have her husband, Uriah, sent to the front lines of battle where Uriah is likely to be killed in order to clear the way for himself. Uriah dies, David take Bathsheba as his wife and they have a son. Needless to say God is displeased by this action. So God sends Nathan, the prophet, to David and through a clever story Nathan convicts David of the sin which he has committed. Until then David had, for whatever reason, not thought his actions worth repenting of. He had to be shown the error of his ways. “You are the man!” Nathan says. It is only then that David can confess, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

Has anyone ever surprised you by saying “You know, what you said back there really hurt me.” Or, “you may not have realized it, but when you did that it made me feel pretty awful.” It can be a difficult revelation to receive, but an essential one. For we are often blind to the level of our sinfulness and our need for repentance. But only when we are aware of it can we take the necessary steps to seek forgiveness.

Similarly, in our Gospel Passage, we learn about the need to know our sins and ask forgiveness for them. Jesus has accepted the invitation of a Pharisee to join him in his home for dinner. But there is an unwelcome guest who has made her way into the room. A woman who is a notorious sinner spends the dinner doing a rather alarming thing. She weeps at the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her tears and hair, kissing them, and anointing them with oil. This act of loving penance is looked upon with disgust by the Pharisee: “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him-- that she is a sinner,” he says. But Jesus looks tenderly upon her act of loving faith and forgives her sins. But not before he makes the point to the Pharisee that he should not think himself above the stain of sin, for this woman has been far more hospitable to Jesus than the Pharisee was.

And then he goes on to make a really interesting point: that the deeper the sins that God forgives the greater experience that person has of God’s love. It is important to know and confess your sins because the more we know and see and confess our sin, the greater our experience of God’s grace in our hearts and lives when we know them to be forgiven.

The sinners are not who we think they are. They are not someone else. They are us. “You are the man!” And even if they *are* who we thought they were, they are not beyond

God's forgiveness. There is no debt too great for God to cancel. And furthermore, the more aware we are of our sinfulness, the more we bring to mind the ways we fail to honor God with our thoughts, words and deeds and love our neighbors as ourselves, then the more we know in our heart the power of God's love expressed in His divine forgiveness. If we can be clear on our debts, then the fact of, not just the hope of, but the fact of God cancelling those debts, can be seen for the incredible, liberating gift that it is.

Because that's really what forgiveness is: an act of liberation. I can't tell you how exactly it works, for that is for God to know and us to experience. But the effect of it is to release us. Release us from our pain, our hurt, our remorse, our shame. We hear often in Scripture that we are a slave to sin, which often is taken to mean that we are beholden to it, like a master; we obey it rather than God. But I wonder if it doesn't also mean that we are enslaved to the feelings and pain that our sin causes us. We are shackled, weighed down, burdened by the hold that those debts place on our hearts and souls. Forgiveness is the great bolt cutter that frees us from those chains and restores us, and the person we offended to fullness of life.

This is where the story of my great-grandfather really hits home for me. Here was a man who knew himself to be a debtor (literally in this case, not metaphorically). It weighed heavily on him every day, I imagine. His soul had become so burdened by it that the very act of relieving those debts was so liberating that it allowed his soul to take flight from his body and ascend right up to heaven. Forgiveness is God's liberating and life-giving Spirit at work in our world.

So, do you know yourself to be a sinner? Do you know yourself to be in debt to the Lord? Do you know the ways in which you have failed to live up to the person God created you to be? Good! For in that knowledge lies the key to an experience of God's grace that is so powerful, so liberating, it can change your life forever. "Your sins are forgiven," Jesus says to the woman. Your sins are forgiven. *Your* sins are forgiven.