
Consider Forgiveness

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A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh

If I tried to explore every aspect of today's gospel I would still be preaching on Easter Sunday! Thus, I am going with one theme and have titled today's sermon "Consider Forgiveness."

Many years ago, Episcopalians used to read this passage during the season of Pentecost. It is a season where we celebrate the gift and joy of the Holy Spirit. Thus, many preachers focused on the joy the father displays when his lost son returns home.

Now we read this passage during the season of Lent. The Book of Common Prayer says Lent is "a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness and restored to the fellowship of the Church." Thus, this holy season of penance, forgiveness and reconciliation are now the lens through which we read today's gospel.

Forgiveness is at the heart of Luke's gospel. As a matter of fact, today's lesson is at the center of Luke's gospel, and if that doesn't signify its importance, then the fact that this story is only found in Luke's gospel, should tell us that Luke is trying to make an important point! What is that point? We should Consider Forgiveness!

As the wedding season approaches, I am spending many hours a week preparing couples for their marriage. We prepare couples for marriage at the cathedral by getting them to draw their genogram (their family tree). One spouse will draw their family tree and share the family story one week, and the other spouse will do the same the next week.

I hear wonderful stories, sad stories, great adventures, painful misfortunes, and we spend some time talking about family dynamics""How will you deal with those crazy parents, crazy aunts and uncles, difficult siblings, and even some of you wild grandparents?!

I have spent numerous hours these past few weeks, with many different couples who represent many different families, and I have got to say there is a little of your family and my family in today's gospel.

How many of your families have fought over an inheritance? Or like today's passage, had someone trying to get a share of the inheritance before your family member was even dead? How many of us have watched in resentment as our parents enable a sibling to squander their hard earned money? How many of us have watched a family member walk out of the house, cut you off for years, only to one day reappear back in your life?

We understand the dynamics of today's gospel because it is real. It is a part of our family story. It is something we can identify with until we get to the ending! The ending is a problem. Why? Because today's gospel ends differently than what we normally see in real life. The families I know take bitterness, resentment and separation to the grave, but in today's passage Jesus offers a different ending to the story. An ending with a message that can be summed up in two words""Consider Forgiveness!

The father in today's story teaches us something about God. We see that God is an unconditional giver, supplying inheritance for the younger son to exploit, while providing security and stability for the older son. Each takes their father's generosity for granted.

But Luke's gospel shows us something else""Neither son (neither the younger or older) is able to comprehend forgiveness. You are probably saying to yourself, "Wallace how can you say that? You can't say the younger son doesn't understand forgiveness." That is exactly what I am saying!

Notice in Luke 15:17, just after the younger son "came to himself" and decided he needed to return home, he rehearsed the speech that he would give to his father: "I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

His rationale: If I plead and beg enough, daddy might let me into the slave quarters and make me one of his servants. This is important because we see the younger son's understanding of forgiveness. We see what he hopes forgiveness will look like""He hopes that he might become a slave in his father's house!

If you look, you will see that just a few verses later (Luke 15:21) the younger son is standing before the father, and he starts that rehearsed speech, and in the middle of the speech, just after he confesses his sin, the father interrupts and starts speaking. The father tells the slave to put the finest robe on the boy, a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet. The father embraces the child as a "beloved son" before the boy can even propose the possibility of serving as a "slave."

The kid didn't get it. The father shows him what it means to forgive. When forgiveness occurs you are returned to the state you were before the wrong was committed!

The father shows us what God's forgiveness looks like. When God forgives, God does not punish us for what we have become. Nor do we have to worry about contriving a plan in order to be forgiven. When we confess, God forgives and restores us to who we are""beloved children.

We know this to be true because this is what God does on the cross. In John's gospel Jesus says, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself." On the cross, Christ extends forgiveness to all people. One of our Eucharistic Prayers articulates it this way: On the cross Christ made "a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world."

The forgiveness of the father in today's parable is like God's forgiveness on the cross. God embraces us on the cross in the same way the father embraces the younger son. If you pray morning prayer, you have prayed the following words: "Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace , ." God's embrace and forgiveness are for everyone!

The younger brother experiences forgiveness in a way that he could never have imagined, and the parable ends with the older brother struggling to "Consider Forgiveness."

Jesus leaves us wondering how the story will end. Did the older brother join the party? Did he ever speak to his younger brother? We can't help but wonder if the story plays out like it does in our families""will the older brother take his resentment to the grave? The story doesn't tell us so we can only speculate.

What we do know is that the father "pleads" with the older brother to join him in forgiving the younger brother. The father pleads with the older son to consider forgiveness. Does he do it? Is he capable of doing it? All we know is that the choice is his, just as the choice is ours. Will we "consider forgiveness"?

I don't know if I can forgive that person. I don't even know where or how I might have the strength to forgive. These are the tough questions we have all asked. They are a part of our daily lives.

Thankfully, Luke offers an answer to these questions. Luke's gospel is the only gospel with the parable of the prodigal son,

and you will not find it a surprise that this is the only gospel that has Jesus saying the following words from the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

How do we forgive? How do we consider forgiveness? We cannot do it on our own; however, we can forgive when we claim God's forgiveness as our own! As Christians, when we claim the cross as something real in our lives we are also claiming that we will extend God's forgiveness and love to others, even to our prodigal brothers.

Let me conclude by referencing one of the last lines in today's gospel passage. The father says something profound to the older son. The father says to the older son, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."

Hear it again: everything I have is yours, even my forgiveness ,

Will you claim the Father's forgiveness?

Will you make the Father's forgiveness your own?

Will you consider forgiveness? AMEN.

This title and sermon engage the work of Miroslav Volf in "Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace."