



Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

SESSION 1

| *Scripture reading: Luke 15:11–32*

Introduction

The Christian faith is indelibly marked by the invitation to receive, and the imperative to offer, forgiveness. Forgiveness is the fountain from which new life flows in a wounded, strife-weary world. It can be reasonably argued that the idea of forgiveness is more central and distinctive to Christianity than any other religion, although most great faith traditions give at least some weight to it. Jesus' words from the cross, forgiving those who crucified him in a profound embodiment of what he taught, reveal this centrality.

Whether the followers of Jesus actually practice forgiveness more than persons of other faiths can be questioned. Perhaps this is, in part, because Christians differ widely in their interpretations of how forgiveness should be practiced. Some urge forgiveness as a Christian duty under all circumstances, while others argue that certain conditions must be met before forgiveness can be meaningful or effective. Some see forgiveness as a matter between particular individuals, and some regard it as meaningful only in the context of larger human communities. Some believe forgiving is the surest route to healing for the injured, while others hold that therapy cannot be the essence of Christian forgiveness. How do we sort through such competing claims and interpretations? What is the core of this powerful gift we are called to participate in? And how do we get past some of our emotional barriers to real forgiveness? These are the kinds of the questions we want to explore together in this study of a theme particularly well suited to the season of Lent, but fit for any season of our lives.

Our aim is threefold: (1) to listen to various voices beyond and within our own minds; (2) to discern some



Forgiveness is an outpouring of love from the inner life of the Trinity, and can only be fully understood when experienced as a transforming power in the life of a human community that mirrors God's being.

complexities of this subject, then claim our own biblically and theologically informed stance; and (3), perhaps most importantly, to begin a few practices that help us develop a mind and heart oriented toward forgiveness.

Who Needs Forgiveness?

Let's start with a familiar parable, The Prodigal Son. We tend to assume that only one of the three main characters of this story needs forgiveness. It is, after all, the younger son who demands his portion of his father's inheritance before even a hint of his father's demise. In traditional Near Eastern culture, this would have been inexcusable behavior in its own right. He then blunders forward into ruin, squandering his entire fortune in "high living" and finding himself broke in the face of unexpected famine. It is hard to sympathize with a young man so self-absorbed and foolish. The last straw to Jewish ears would have been his complete self-degradation by hiring himself out to a pig farmer. Not only has this son dishonored his father and led a morally reprehensible life, he has defiled himself by association with unclean animals.

Certainly this young man needs to turn himself around and seek forgiveness. His sins are abundantly clear. Sure

enough, once he realizes his predicament and remembers what his father's household is like, he undergoes an inward repentance. His mental speech to his father reveals first an admission of offense ("I have sinned against heaven and before you"), then a turn to shame and humility ("I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands"). Everything is in order so far. The younger son is in need of forgiveness and has taken steps that could make his father's forgiveness possible.

But this story is not so simple. The father in this tale does not act like a typical Middle Eastern patriarch, gravely standing on his authority, testing the authenticity of his younger son's intentions and slowly relenting on his own legitimate grievances. This father acts like a Jewish mama incurably attached to a youngest child, rushing forward to embrace his filthy boy, not even waiting for him to finish his repentance speech. Then Dad orders up a big party to celebrate the return of this extravagant waster of wealth. Is the *father* acting responsibly? Is his behavior excusable? Does he need to be forgiven for allowing his emotions to rule the day, for acting without dignity or justice?

Apparently the older brother thinks so. He is appalled by what he sees his father doing upon his younger brother's return. The elder son feels the sting of injustice keenly. He has been dutiful, respectful, and responsible all his life. He has done everything according to law and custom, yet his father has never thrown a party to celebrate his right living. What he surely sees is an obvious breach of equity in his father's treatment of his two sons. His father, it seems, just takes his older son for granted and shows clear favoritism toward the younger son.

The elder brother suffers self-righteous indignation. He feels aggrieved about how his father welcomes back the younger son, without conditions or any apparent concern for justice. We can imagine how the elder son's resentment of his brother arose when the younger made a premature claim on his share of the family inheritance. Surely resentment grew deeper over the period of time his brother was absent. Reports of reckless, wasteful, and immoral behavior must have come back through the grapevine, shaming and dishonoring the family's reputation. No doubt the older brother's heart had long since closed toward his younger brother. He suffered from a hard heart, a sclerosis of love. Did he also need

his father's forgiveness? Did these two brothers need to forgive each other as well?

Perhaps we begin to see the complexity of this simple parable. Jesus seems to want us to grapple with various forms of alienation from each other and from God. Perhaps he hopes we will learn to see ourselves in this story in more than one way.

An Individual or Communal Affair?

Some would say forgiveness is primarily an individual matter. Individuals are responsible for their own bad decisions or attitudes and no one else is to blame. Certainly with respect to God, each soul must speak from its own conscience to its life choices before the Creator. The position promoting individual accountability for sin is easy to grasp and widely held.

Others argue that forgiveness is primarily about life in a community of persons rather than about isolated individuals. Human minds, hearts, and lives are shaped by communities and in turn impact communities. We arrive at ideas, decisions, and actions in the context of relationships. Is it then fair to attribute a person's poor choices entirely to that one individual? Are not others at least partly implicated? A failed marriage or friendship is rarely the entire fault of one partner. This position on forgiveness is less evident and messier to sort out. It involves asking what systemic failures within families, schools, churches, businesses, or governing structures may contribute to personal moral and ethical failures. It invites us to consider whether we are unwitting "enablers" or even coconspirators with the fallen among us.

The story of the Prodigal Son suggests that matters of forgiveness are not always as clear as they first appear. In this case, both brothers need their father's forgiveness for different offenses. To Jesus' Jewish audience, the younger brother would be the obvious case, and no doubt Jesus painted his character to make it as obvious as possible. But Jesus is also speaking to the good, upright Pharisees of his time (and ours) in the figure of the older brother. The subtler message of this story, for those with ears to hear, is that our self-righteous judgment against obvious sinners places us in the same boat with them before God. Indeed, our need of forgiveness may be greater because we do not see it and can



Forgiveness in a family is generally a complex affair rooted in years of messy personal dynamics.

therefore hide under the illusion that we are without sin while pointing the finger at others. In psychological terms, this is called “projection.” We do not see the darkness within us, so we conveniently project it onto those we can easily label as “wrong-doers.”

Jesus has a lot to say about this form of sin. Many of his warnings to the serious religious folk of his day pointed to the trap of self-righteous judgment. His parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14) is told “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (v. 9). Another example is his sharp question in the Sermon on the Mount, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3) is set in the context of warning against judging others.

Forgiveness in a family is generally a complex affair rooted in years of messy personal dynamics. In the parable of the prodigal, we might well imagine strains between these two brothers long before the younger decided to depart, strains that possibly contributed to his desire to leave. We might wonder what the father’s relationship with each son had been like, or at least how each son perceived his father in relation to himself and his brother. We wonder because we have grown up in families and have our own experiences with parents and siblings that evoke feelings of empathy with, or resistance to, these characters.

The matter here is whether human forgiveness is about broader relationships in community than merely the spiritual and psychological needs of individuals. While the needs of individuals are always deeply relevant, the larger picture is one of human beings thrown together in multiple relationships that intersect in a complex web of love, friendship, miscommunication, self-interest, hurt, healing, and reconciliation.

Scholar Gregory Jones argues that if we start our ideas about forgiveness with the isolated individual, we’ll get it wrong. The starting point is God—a community of persons within a profound and mysterious unity we call the Holy Trinity. Forgiveness is an outpouring of love from the inner life of the Trinity and can only be fully understood when experienced as a transforming power in the life of a human community that mirrors God’s being.

A Deeper Kinship Story

Ella Cara Deloria tells a story of life among the Dakota Sioux Indians that illustrates the less obvious, communal dynamics of forgiveness. A young man in the tribe had been murdered and his enraged relatives were gathered to plan revenge. The eldest male in the clan listened to them talk out their aggrieved feelings and vindictive intentions, repeating to them what he heard them say. He then smoked quietly and calmly for a while. Finally he spoke again to say there was a better way—a harder, but better, way that they would take. He told them to go home, look over their possessions, and bring back the one thing they prized most.

The gifts you bring shall go to the murderer, for a token of our sincerity and our purpose. Though he has hurt us, we shall make him . . . [a relative], in place of the one who is not here. Was the dead your brother? Then this man shall be your brother. . . . As for me, the dead was my nephew. Therefore, his slayer shall be my nephew. And from now on he shall be one of us. We shall regard him as though he were our dead kinsman returned to us.¹

This “harder way” demanded of each person in the clan a powerful inner struggle to master pride, anger, and desire for revenge. But they accepted the challenge, because they could see that it was deeply right. They realized that a violent response would only fuel fires of hate over time, but that the difficult task of taking this man into their family on a daily basis had the potential to heal them all. At the appointed time, the murderer was brought into the council tepee, and given the peace pipe with these words:

Smoke, with these your new kinsmen seated here. For they have chosen to take you to themselves in place of one who is not here. . . . It is their desire that henceforth you shall go in and out among them without fear. By these presents which they have brought here for you, they would have you know that whatever love and compassion they had for him is now yours, forever.²

Deeply moved, the slayer began to weep. The narrator then remarks that this man will surely prove himself the best possible kinsman, given the high price of his redemption.

This incident is a story of forgiveness, although the Sioux elder never used that term. The characters spoke in terms of kinship. Their act of reconciliation was presented as a way to make their extended family whole once more, filling the empty place of the departed with the very one responsible for his death. It was a corporate act of forgiveness that was simultaneously a profound act of communal self-healing and peacemaking. The effect was to reknit the badly torn fabric of their community.

By hearing and acting on their elder's wisdom, the Sioux tribe was able to grasp the truth of their humanity in common with a violent offender. The act of selecting and bringing a most prized possession from each home was a way of symbolizing the giving of themselves to the offender. It required them to acknowledge and act upon their deeper sense of human identification with each other.

In taking the slayer into their hearts in place of the relative he killed, this extended family grasped the need for their whole community to heal a heart-wrenching wound on that community. They understood their common humanity with the offender as a fundamental resource for reconciliation. Such a perspective is more often found among indigenous peoples than among those shaped by the rationalism and individualism of Western culture. Indeed, such a perspective stands as a profound challenge to our ordinary way of thinking. Yet perhaps our Christian faith offers us a way to connect the Sioux "kinship appeal" with Jesus' life and teaching.

Forgiveness, Communion, and Renewal

As human beings, we are all created in the same image and likeness—God's. There is a deep well of life from which we come and to which we return. According to Quaker writer Douglas Steere, our souls "are interconnected in God, as though the many wicks of our lamps draw their oil from the same full cruse in which they are all immersed."³ God made us for communion with

our Creator, with each other, and with the whole natural order. The Genesis story of Eden paints a picture of such harmonious relationships, and the Hebrew concept of shalom—peaceful and holistic wellbeing—expresses it well.

But if we are spiritually united by virtue of our creation, we are sorrowfully united as well in our fall from the grace of such unity. All of us are alienated in various degrees from God, one another, the created order, and our true selves. Yet while our broken relationships cause terrible harm and division in this world, the spiritual truth of our human commonality remains intact. God's love unites us by invisible bonds. It is a spiritual reality we know and claim in Christ, even though our churches are often sad case studies in human conflict.

The communion we were made for is the life Christ came to renew. We participate in this renewal each time we celebrate Holy Communion. Perhaps it should not surprise us that the Native American peace-pipe ritual bears some parallel to this Christian sacrament. Each man smoking the common pipe is reminded of his own center, also understood to be the center of each person and of the whole universe. Do we not also understand that Christ dwells deep down—if unrecognized—in every person: "just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . , you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40)? And that Christ dwells at the core of the cosmos: ". . . all things have been created through him and for him. . . . And in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:16–17)? He is our unity who has reconciled us all to God. In the restoration of communion with God and each other Christ brings us renewed life. At the heart of this new life lies the gift of divine forgiveness. Yet in order to receive such mercy we must first see how much we need it, our subject for next week.

About the Writer

Marjorie Thompson is an author, teacher, pastor, and retreat leader in the ministry of spiritual formation.

Endnotes

1. Ella Cara Deloria, *Waterlily* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 192.
2. *Ibid.*, 193.
3. Douglas Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 69.