

The Gospel According to Luke 15:11-32 (“The Parable of the Lost Son”)

11 Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. **12** The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

13 “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. **14** After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. **15** So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. **16** He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! **18** I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ **20** So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. **23** Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. **24** For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

25 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. **27** ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. **29** But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

31 “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. **32** But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

From the Gospel According to Matthew 18: 21-35 (“The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant”)

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

23 “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. **24** As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. **25** Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

26 “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ **27** The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

28 “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

29 “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

30 “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. **31** When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32 “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. **33** Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ **34** In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Sermon: Reflections on Forgiveness & Ministry

Our scriptures today both deal with the theme of forgiveness. It is amazing how often something like forgiveness--something the scriptures insist on--can get overlooked as a spiritual practice. Today I want to focus on forgiveness in part because it's important for its own sake, but especially because today we are lifting up and celebrating one year since Caity and I arrived in Ashfield; one year since I became a minister alongside each of you at our church. And in our readings today, these things--our capacity for forgiveness and our opportunities for celebration--are tied very closely together. I think we'll find, if we look carefully enough, that genuine forgiveness is *itself* the celebration of God's love, and more precisely, it is the intentional celebration of God's love for us personally. The quote in our bulletin today is from the novelist Anne Lamott; “forgiveness is giving up all hope of having had a better past.” I think our scriptures today agree with Anne, but put it a little differently. In our readings today, I think we find that forgiveness places all its hope--its faith and trust--in the belief that God's love is undeterred by our pasts; that God's love is preoccupied with our future, with guiding us home

and into a new kin-dom, where what God inherently forgives may finally be forgiven by each of us as well.

But I want to begin with the parable in our reading from the Gospel according to Luke. Many of us will be very familiar with this parable of the prodigal son, but, very briefly for those who aren't: in this parable, a son who has sinned greatly against his own father, finally returns home and collapses into his father's welcoming embrace. The father, much to the rest of his family's dismay, instantly celebrates his son's return home and throws a great feast to mark the occasion. The father does not insist that his son present some elaborate litany of his sins. He just welcomes his son home in lavish joy.

I think there is a tendency to think of the father's gracious reception of his son as the *act* of forgiveness to be witnessed in the story—but it is not. The act of forgiveness happens elsewhere. We could say it happens along the son's road, as he realizes how he has become unworthy of his father, how he has disfigured their relationship. His father's attitude toward him never changes at any point in the parable, but *the son's* attitude toward his father does change. So we could say the son forgives himself. I think this gets us much closer to the teaching of this parable; we as wayward children, as sinners, have the capacity for contrition, for self-forgiveness. But I don't think that's quite the full meaning of this parable either. I think the parable is teaching us that the forgiveness is already done before the son ever confesses or even ever commits his sins. As the Dominican priest Herbert McCabe has written, "we shouldn't come to confession in order for our sins to be forgiven;" rather, "we should come to confession in order to celebrate that our sins *are* forgiven." Contrition, forgiveness, these are words that describe something we have the power to do in our own lives, to joyfully celebrate that "our

blindfold and our blindness have gone,” and we can see clearly again the love God has for each of us. In this light, the parable of the prodigal son is the simple story of forgiveness being rediscovered on the road within ourselves, so that we may return to, and feast at, the banquet of God’s unconditional love.

Now, our parable from Matthew today begins much like the parable of the prodigal son. Matthew is relating another parable for the Kingdom of God--for heaven on earth--a parable for the kind of society that will prevail here when we hew much closer to our faith and good will.

Just as was the case with the prodigal son with his father, so long as the servant in this parable refuses to see that the king loves him, the relationship is disfigured, it is transactional, it is like dealing with a paymaster who will ruthlessly demand repayment of any debts. But when the servant falls to his knees--like coming to confession--he brings a new possibility into view. And the king, because he is like God, immediately takes pity, has compassion for the servant. After all, the servant owes an impossible sum (our translation today describes it as “10 thousand bags of gold,” which we know is more than the entire tribute paid by Galilee to Rome over as many as fifteen years!). It is not an amount that could ever be repaid. But it is not until the servant confesses the sinfulness of this kind of relationship--a relationship of profound debt and enslavement--that a new kind of king is allowed to present himself. A king who is not merely patient or gentle, not merely polite or well-mannered in taking repayment, but rather a king who instead cancels the debt altogether. This act of love is possible because the servant has been contrite, has at least begun to forgive himself; now the king can embrace him in no less a stirring way, no less an unconditionally loving way, than the father who embraced his prodigal son.

I think it is right here where these two parables intersect that we begin to catch a glimpse of the Gospel: the Kingdom of God, that shining world still to come, that abundant banquet, the *celebration* that God persists in inviting us to attend, is the unconditional love of a parent, utterly unaffected by their child's mistakes or sins--*and* it is also the unconditional forgiveness of our financial debts, no matter how great they may be. When we pair these things together, we begin to catch a glimpse of that divine place where our blindfolds have gone, where love overcomes even money.

This is not an easy thing to affirm in this country today, but in fact we do affirm it every time we say the Lord's Prayer. While we typically translate the Lord's Prayer as "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" another good translation for that line in our prayer is "forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors".

Now, the second part of the parable from Matthew complicates our glimpse of this heavenly picture. The self forgiveness of the servant will end up proving false, and we lose will an occasion to celebrate as a result. But, today, here at our church, we are celebrating. So let us save the second part of Matthew for another day.

I remember our arrival to Ashfield very vividly. It wasn't easy to make the move, we were driving a long way and you've seen the size of our car. Fortunately we had a sense of adventure about it. It was an occasion for celebration, we felt we were finally starting the thing we had been waiting for. We took our time, making stops in North Carolina and Pennsylvania. When we arrived, we had incredible early September weather, which was no small thing because in Jacksonville that is the toughest part of summer. Living through it now for the second time, I think September might be my favorite month here, still warm during the clear

sunny days, but now refreshingly cool at night and in the morning; the trees at the top of the hills begin to prophecy about the coming autumn. That is what it felt like in our first Sundays together in our sanctuary, refreshing and full of energy. Mostly as I would quickly learn, that energy was preparing for the monumental tasks of Fall Festival. What a treat it was to share Fall Festival with our families. It is more than a little bittersweet to sit with these memories at this time, as we continue to navigate a particularly strange and challenging and dangerous time. It is hard to put into words how grateful I have been to have arrived when I did and not months later. It is hard to put into words how grateful I am to have been embraced in those first months so wholeheartedly by our beautiful church community. That embrace has continued in this time when we haven't been in our sanctuary together—it has continued in the many cards and letters, the fresh vegetables and maple syrup, blueberry cobbler and peaches and raspberries, and recently a number of housewarming gifts including ones from Sadie and Anna; your energy and faithfulness has been keeping my spirit, like a refuge.

When I try to puzzle out how it is that I became a minister in Ashfield, Massachusetts, and I think about the many choices and decisions and communities that have led me to this one, I have to say I find myself celebrating the journey that brought me first to Caity and so to Jacksonville, and then brought us both here to New England. I think the parable of the prodigal son is one of my favorites because I have been wayward like that, not to the same degree of course. But I left my hometown a long time ago thinking about myself and about what I would do with my life, for myself. I didn't pay much attention to the pressure I was putting on my parents to help support me through college and grad school only to then discern a call to seminary and ministry. And more recently, I have struggled a little bit when I think about

coworkers that had come to rely on me to be there for them, to help them navigate an economic system stacked against them. But this is the celebration, for me, to be here now in this place I love, at a church I love, with people I love and admire, with so many partners in ministry. So I'm still struggling to forgive myself for taking too much from my parents, for leaving friends behind. But you, as my own parents have always done, as Caity does, as God does for us all, you have received me with lavish joy, and welcomed me home. So today, I thank you. I thank the families of Dot Roberts, of Pete Roberts, of John LaBelle, of Lenny Fuller, of Mary Hoff, and of Morgan Kerivan. These families in particular I owe a debt of gratitude, for trusting me with their vulnerability and grief. I thank Amy and Margery and our Deacons and Trustees, and all our congregants who have worshipped with us this past year, who have sung so beautifully in our choir, who have been friends to our church and supported our ministries, and all who have made this year a year for true self-forgiveness and joyful celebration.

Alleluia and Amen.