



Sermon

The Generosity of Forgiveness

Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Cor 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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Last week, Peter Lloyd spoke about the forgiveness God offers us and how our repentance is necessary for relationship to be restored. As we continue through Lent we are given the opportunity to consider our need to amend our lives and the depth of God's generosity and grace to us as he forgives us. Today we have heard the lovely story Jesus told of the Prodigal son.

You know the story; you have just heard it again. Perhaps you might enjoy this telling:

Melody in F

Feeling footloose and frisky, a featherbrained fellow forced his fond father to fork over the farthings and flew far to foreign fields and frittered his fortune feasting fabulously with faithless friends.

Fleeced by his fellows in folly and facing famine, he found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy farmyard. Fairly famishing, he fain would have filled his frame with foraged food from fodder fragments.

"Phooey! My father's flunkies fare far finer!" The frazzled fugitive, frankly facing facts, frustrated by failure and filled with foreboding, fled forthwith to his family. Falling at his father's feet, he forlornly fumbled: "Father, I've flunked. I've fruitlessly forfeited family favour".

The farsighted father, forestalling any further flinching, frantically flagged the flunkies to fetch a fatling from the flock and fix a feast. The fugitive's fault-finding brother frowned on fickle forgiveness of former folderol, but the faithful father figured: "Filial fidelity is fine, but the fugitive is found! What forbids fervent festivity? Let flags be unfurled, let fanfares flare!"

So father's forgiveness formed the foundation for the former fugitive's future fortitude.

By Phil!

Jesus told this story to make a point. There are three main characters and we learn something from each of them.

There was a father with two boys. The younger son asks for his inheritance. In Judaism, the estate was divided equally between the sons, except that the oldest son would get a double portion to allow him to care for his mother and any dependent sisters. So he was asking for a third of his father's property.

To ask for your inheritance before the death of your father is tantamount to wishing him dead. It was a terrible insult. That is stressed even more by the wording, which is literally, "so the Father divided his life or living between them." When we set out to rebel against God, we do in effect wish him dead – some even

come out and say it. The resistance of some to acknowledge that there is a God maybe because if they admit it they need to obey him and they don't want to.

Soon afterwards the son leaves home with all his money and goes to a distant place where he lives it up. There were parties, he was the life and soul of the party – everyone wanted to be his friend – he had money! From verse 30 we learn he was visiting prostitutes. He lives riotously as the KJV puts it. The Greek word is derived from the opposite of salvation. We could say he lived outside salvation.

Verse 14: His money runs out; there is a famine in the land – suddenly his friends don't want to know him. He looks for work and is so desperate he takes a job with a gentile as a pig herd! Remember, pigs are unclean under Jewish Law. As if that were not bad enough, he is not given anything to eat and is so hungry he would like to eat the carob pods he was feeding to the pigs. It is the depth of degradation.

Verse 17: When he came to his senses How much does it take to bring us to our senses? Sometimes it is only a crisis which will wake people up to their real need. Maybe you have a family member who is stumbling in the pig pen, hungry and dirty. Pray for him to come to his senses – maybe he needs a crisis to wake him up?

Our young man comes to his sense and says, “Phooey, my father's flunkys fare far finer!” Dad treats his casual workers far better than this. I would be better off working as a labourer for Dad. So he decides to go home but will his father let him return? Perhaps he is so mad at him that he will drive him away. Have you been in that position with God? “I've blown it, insulted him, wished he were dead, spoilt everything he gave me – how can I go back now? I can't go near him.”

So the boy thinks out what to say, “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants.” He leaves and walks towards home. Can you imagine him saying it over and over again so he will get it right when he has to face his father? “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants.”

The boy didn't realise but his father had been longing for him to return. It was not a case of ‘out of sight out of mind.’ No, he has been watching and waiting for him. He peers into the distance and finally, one day, he recognises his son's walk as he trudges wearily along the road.

The father is filled with compassion for his son. Deeply stirred, he runs to him - Jewish men never ran, it was considered most undignified. But he is so ardent he runs and hugs him and kisses him again and again not caring about the stained and pig-muck-stinking clothes of his son.

However, the boy has a speech he has been practising. Do you remember it? He says, “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

What was missing? Jack Hayford suggests a word was omitted: “MMAOOYHS” - the muffled attempt to say “Make me as one of your hired servants.” Muffled because his Father will not allow him to say it and has put his hand over his mouth.

It was true that he had sinned against his father. It was also true that he had sinned against God since all offences against others are offences against God's nature and ways. But the Father would not receive him back as a servant only as a son. God will not receive you as a slave only as a son or daughter.

The father gives orders to his servants to bring the best robe, a ring and sandals.

Clean robes are a consistent symbol of righteousness throughout scripture. He clothed his son with clean robes. When we come to Father God repentant, he wraps us in righteousness instead of our filthy rags. In the Epistle reading, Paul writes of our being granted the righteousness of God – that is what the robe represents.

A ring is put on his finger – the ring is a signet ring of authority. It is the authority of the household to buy and sell and make contracts.

Sandals are placed on his feet. Slaves go barefoot not heirs. He is given the status of a free man.

Finally, his father called, “Fetch a fatling from the flock and fix a feast!” There is rejoicing in heaven – God rejoices – when a sinner turns back to him.

Have you been in the footsteps of the prodigal son? Have you turned back to God and admitted you have done wrong and asked forgiveness? Most of you have, but there may be some here who have never done that. Know that Father God is watching and longing for that time when you do. And when you do overcome all that holds you back, God will rejoice over you as a long lost child. He elevates you to freedom, gives you his righteousness and trusts you with the family authority.

If you haven’t yet come before God to ask his forgiveness – I ask you, “Is this the day? If not now – when?” Come forward at the end of the service for pray and give your heart to God.

The Old Testament reading tells of the first Passover celebrated in the land of Israel. The Passover meal was about their deliverance from Egypt and the protection from plague of their firstborn. We know Christ has fulfilled the meaning of the Passover lamb in his self giving at Calvary. As we heard from the Corinthians reading, God was in him reconciling the world to himself. Paul makes it clear that all our sin was laid on Jesus when he went to the cross. He took it on himself and paid the penalty for it. In exchange he gave us his righteousness (represented by the robe in the Prodigal son story).

When we come to Easter in a few weeks’ time, we are having a Parish Passover meal on the Thursday evening. The Last Supper was a Passover meal. Our communion service is based on Jesus’ actions at that meal. When we have a Christian Passover meal it helps us understand the events of the Last Supper and indeed our communion service so much better – it is a rich experience – I hope you will all make a point of coming to it.

There is more to the Prodigal son story though – the older son. He is not best pleased by the Father’s enthusiastic welcome for his brother. While we like to focus on the welcome of the younger boy and rejoice in our own experience of acceptance and forgiveness, the reason Jesus told the story was given back in verse 2:

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them."

In the story, the brother is so angry he will not come in. Never think the Bible as unrealistic and pious – this is gritty family drama. The father goes out to him and pleads with him but the son is full of resentment.

Verse 29: `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.

Can you hear what Jesus is portraying: “I have been keeping the law meticulously, living strictly by the commandments and you give me nothing while these loose-living immoral people who don’t even care about the Law swan in here and you forgive them too easily and lavish your benefits on them – it’s not fair! They don’t deserve it!”

The older boy has been living as servant when he was an heir. His inheritance had already been divided out to him back at the beginning and the father replies: "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."

Does this have relevance to us? It can. We can resent those who have not held to our personal standards and not wish them to find acceptance and salvation – they should be punished! We need to keep watch on our attitude – this can creep in. Non-Christians are convinced it is how most churches are. Where have they got that idea from? Presumably the way some have treated them. But we know that Church is a place where one beggar tells another beggar where to get food. We have all spent our lives proving we cannot be righteous before God by our efforts. Our righteousness is all a gift from Jesus when he took our filthy sins onto himself and died in our place.

The last words of the Parable are: Verse 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." Jesus didn't say how the older brother responded. We know how most of the Pharisees responded – by plotting to kill him. How will we respond?

Again, if you know you need to find forgiveness and relationship with God, come forward at the end of the service. If you find you relate more to the older son, perhaps you need to come forward then as well to repent of that attitude and let God give you his love and appreciation for sinners who are returning to the Father.