

Embracing Forgiveness

Luke 15:11-32; Colossians 3:12-17
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What purpose does the church serve? Why attend a church, participate in its activities, be a member? I'm sure it's not just for the free coffee.

Maybe I should tackle an entire series exploring possible answers to those questions, but this week I've been thinking of two, and they are related to our current sermon series entitled "The Work of Love," about the work we must put into creating and sustaining our various relationships.

Last week I encouraged you to be intentional about creating a family from among the people you know and not limiting it to your family of origin. To be intentional about making your family of choice intergenerational and diverse, reaching out to those who are alone and lonely and themselves in need of love and support.

So, this is one thing that the church is good at. We are a place where you can find a diverse, intergenerational group of people who can become part of your family, those individuals who love and care for you, who support and respect you, and who empower you to live authentically as who God made you to be. And, really, there may be no other institution remaining in America which does precisely this. The church still performs the vital role of helping you to form that extended family. We also help you develop the skills to make those relationships work, which is what I'm talking about this summer.

Maybe the most important skill we all need if we are going to be successful at loving other people and being loved by them is the skill of forgiveness. And this skill is intimately tied to the central stories of our faith and the core ideas we teach about God and humanity and our hope for the world. So, one of the reasons you should be part of a church is that we are going to help you become a more forgiving person.

We are empowered to establish certain expectations in our relationships with other adults. We do not have to endure hurtful family members. This is part of what I spoke on last week, and this week's message on forgiveness is the important corollary to last week's message of personal empowerment.

All of our relationships, be it with friends or our beloved or even with co-workers, require that we learn to live with each. I've got important news for you: You are not perfect. You will make mistakes. You will fail to live up to expectations and duties. You will be selfish. You will hurt people, and they will hurt you. How, then, do we learn to live with these truths? How do we learn to live with other people?

I'm going to use the image of embrace, borrowing from the work of the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*. For who doesn't need a hug, at least every now and then? I think the world would be a better place if we all got hugged more

often. Now, I also know that many of you aren't particularly huggers. I think it must be a Midwestern thing, because where I come from in places like Oklahoma and Texas, we hug a whole lot more. Laura and Bonnie, two of our newer members, are huggers. Every week they get annoyed if I try to shake their hands. So, this emphasis on hugging is for you two.

Jesus told a story about embrace—it is the story I read a moment ago, the one we often call “the Parable of the Prodigal Son.” A man has two sons. One of them rebels against the traditional duties of a son and asks his father for his inheritance while his father is still living. (That's not very nice.)

Surprisingly, the father agrees, and then the son leaves home to go it alone. The son lives wildly and promiscuously. He quickly runs through his money and ends up in poverty. He becomes something of a slave, working in the slop house feeding the pigs and eating from the pigs' scraps. (Always a vivid detail.)

Eventually he recalls that servants in his father's house were treated better than this, so he decides to return home, beg his father's forgiveness, and plead with his father to make him a servant.

The father, meanwhile, has all this time missed his son. Every day he has looked out, down the road, hoping to see him. One day, in the distance, he sees someone coming and despite how changed the young man is, the father knows it is his son. And he runs. He runs down the road to his rebellious and dirty son, stinking from the pigs, and immediately grabs him in his arms and holds him tight.

This father didn't need to think about what to do. He didn't need to debate the rules. He didn't need to consider whether his son's violations and rebellions disqualified him. The father didn't even need to learn tolerance or go to therapy. He loved his son; and as a loving parent, he embraced him.

It's a heartwarming story, but we human beings aren't very good at forgiveness. It doesn't come naturally and it can be difficult. To become good at forgiveness, we must unlearn many bad habits. We must unlearn taking offense easily. We must unlearn defensiveness and selfishness. We must quit gossiping (I do have that problem on occasion). We have to develop patience and self-control and humility. We need a generosity of spirit. A graciousness. We have to learn to be honest while also being tactful and compassionate (not all of my friends have always been good at that). We have to learn to listen. We have to try understanding things from a different person's point of view. We need to be fair and merciful. (That's a tall order.)

It doesn't mean that we don't ever get hurt or angry or upset. It doesn't mean that you're a bad person if your emotions explode. Because sometimes that happens. If it happens for you too often, then it's something you need to work on, but occasionally being overcome with emotion is only natural.

Practicing forgiveness doesn't mean that we always sacrifice our own interests for someone else's. There are times, as I said last week, that we must stand up for ourselves.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that we overlook all wrongs and injustices. The great Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf has said that “full reconciliation cannot take place until the truth has been said and justice done.”

And, forgiveness is just one step in the process of reconciliation. Sometimes reconciliation eludes us. We often can't be and shouldn't be reconciled to abusers. We can't be reconciled to another person if that person constantly rejects our attempts at reconciliation. But even in those circumstances where we cannot and should not embrace one another, we can practice forgiveness. Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting; that is such a mistaken idea. In these circumstances of abuse and violence, forgiveness means that the wrong done to us no longer has the power to control us. We have released it and begun the journey of healing. This is itself often a long and difficult process that requires a supportive and saving community.

I think forgiveness is *the* Christian practice that creates genuine family. Let's face it, family are the people we generally hurt the most. (After all, they are the ones who encounter us before that first cup of coffee in the morning.) Maybe it's because we feel free to expose our ugliest and darkest sides because we assume that these people will continue to love us despite our ugliness and darkness. That's true, a family's love should be unconditional. But we need to learn not to take advantage of that love, not to exploit it. We can't take that love for granted. True love requires work.

Let's explore this image of embrace a little further.

The embrace begins by opening the arms. With this gesture we state that we are reaching for and welcoming another person into the center of our being. We are inviting them to become a part of our identity and for us to become a part of theirs. It reveals that we are unsatisfied with our independent self, that we have a desire to be connected with others. (Who would have thought a hug meant all of that? Those theologians sure are working hard to figure all that out).

The next step in hugging another person is waiting. Miroslav Volf cautions that we can't just reach out and grab another person. To do so is to violate their autonomy. The embrace must open itself and wait for the other to choose to enter.

Often our process of seeking forgiveness ends here. We open ourselves to another and hope that they will engage with us in mending the broken relationship, but the other person never takes the step into our embrace.

It is unfortunate when this happens. It can bring us pain and may result in anger or bitterness. However, we should never stop opening our arms. We should keep hoping that the other person will join us in the process of reconciliation.

The third step in the embrace occurs when the other person does enter into it: we close our arms around them. Each of us holding the other one. We are both active and passive. There is mutual giving and receiving.

And we are at our most vulnerable. In the process of reconciliation, this is the moment when we have accepted each other into our identity. Exclusion has been trumped by inclusion. Distance has been overcome. But the process isn't over.

Finally, we open our arms again. We don't stay locked in embrace forever. We don't hold onto the other person, stifling their freedom. We let them go, to continue living their own authentic life. But now we are both transformed by the reconciliation of the broken relationship.

One lesson we draw from the parable is that welcoming and embracing others should become a habit that occurs without thinking. We should accept others regardless of who they

are. But learning this habit takes time, practice, and work.

And, I believe that we learn this habit by being part of the church. Because this is a relatively safe place, the kind of place where you can risk embracing one another, because we are a bunch of people who every week confess our sins, admitting that we need to be forgiven.

And in the church there are great role models. Here we encounter people who have struggled through issues similar to ours, who have experienced broken relationships and the work it takes to find reconciliation, people who have the wisdom gained from a lifetime of experience.

And, finally, the church is the community shaped by an ancient story of a God who loves each of us unconditionally, like a father and a mother. A God who sacrificed everything so that we might be saved. A God whose Spirit fills all of creation, drawing us together in unity and joy.