

The Aftermath of Forgiveness
Exodus 32:30-35
Luke 7:36-50

“But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.”

When you are in the depths, when the only thing on your mind is how you have wronged another, let another down, betrayed another's trust (and unless your capacity for self-deception has been perfected over a lifetime of duplicity, I think you each must know what I am talking about so far), when you have hurt the one you love deeply, disastrously, dreadfully, forgiveness is unimaginable. Now if the relationship has any hope of being salvaged; if there is to be a future in which you are included in the other person's life; selfishly, if you are to go on living with yourself, you need to do something, to make amends, to redeem yourself. So you rehearse an apology; you mull over possible gestures that could disarm the beloved's anger long enough to be heard; you try to imagine what would show your friend how sorry you really are; you see yourself down the road begging to be allowed to start over with a clean slate or be given a second go at things; hat in hand, you ask for a chance to prove your love, your trustworthiness, your honest intention to change over the days or weeks or months ahead.

To borrow a word that figured prominently in the Reformation, our human inclination is to seek a means by which we can *merit* the forgiveness of the one we have wronged or hurt or betrayed or deceived. We want to do something concrete to earn our way back into the trust that once was freely given. We want to take redemption into our own hands.

But when the One wronged turns out to be God, now the human need to be forgiven is a need that religious institutions of every stripe—synagogue and mosque, church and ashram--have taken to the bank. Research the history of the sacrament of penance and you learn that

- By the third century, penitents confessed their sins to the whole community, were excommunicated for a period of time, ate plain food and wore squalid clothes, prayed and

gave alms until such time as the bishop decided their repentance was adequate and restored them to full communion.

- In the fourth century, penitents were given a twelve year “time out” that ended on Maundy Thursday when the bishop readmitted them to the table. This was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, so sinners under the age of 35 were not eligible lest they lapse again before the grave.
- In the fifth century, Augustine distinguished three ways of being reconciled with God: the remission of all previous sins through baptism; daily remission through prayer and fasting of ‘light and small sins; and still, the formal one-time remission of deadly and serious sin through public penance. But in this same century, the administration of the sacrament began to breakdown. Apparently the growing number of Christians made it hard to keep track of sins and sinners, while the onerous restrictions placed on penitents kept more and more from public confession.
- In the sixth century, Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks instituted private confession. A handbook now proscribed the punitive penance appropriate to the sin. Some quit the sacrament altogether, though substitutionary penance allowed one person to do the penance required of another. No doubt this made way for the purchase of indulgences.
- In the sixteenth century, after John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* had been through three or four revisions, the Council of Trent upheld a non-communal, individualistic approach to the sacrament and recognized two sorts of contrition: perfect contrition which was true sorrow motivated by love of God; imperfect contrition that arose out of fear of hell and punishment.

John Calvin would have none of this! Believing the church had been dead wrong for almost 1500 years about the God with whom there is forgiveness, he railed against the sacrament of penance. “By their insistence that full contrition and confession must *precede* absolution,...[the church has] subjected forgiveness to intolerable conditions,” conditions that left the penitent perpetually anxious and the church’s coffers comfortably full! According to Calvin, “It makes a great difference whether you teach forgiveness of sins as deserved by just and full contrition, which the sinner can never perform; or whether you enjoin [the sinner] to hunger and thirst after God’s mercy to show him—through the recognition of his misery, his vacillation, his weariness and his captivity—where he ought to seek refreshment, rest, and freedom; in fine, to teach him in his humility to give glory to God.” Notice now how the order of the psalmist’s prayer sounds downright reformed! *But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.* Reverence is the aftermath of forgiveness, not the condition!

Enter the woman who was a sinner, the woman who was like a communicable disease, the woman who brings the contamination of impurity into the house of Simon. Everything about her is wrong. First of all, she is a woman entering a world where only men have been invited; second she is a woman of the city, a designation that presumes poverty if not prostitution to be her lot; third, she lets down her hair which, according to New Testament scholar Joel Green, would have been on par with appearing topless today; and finally, weeping, she begins to kiss Jesus' feet, an erotic act to say the least. If anyone were in need of the unimaginable forgiveness with which we began, surely it is this woman. Simon says so, to himself, and so do we as we quietly reach for our iphone and dial 911.

Jesus hears what we say to the dispatcher about the intruder who is threatening an otherwise civilized evening, and he invites us to reconsider our judgment. He tells us of a man who was owed a year's wage by one and a month's wage by another. Neither could pay, so the man *cancels* (CANCELS!) the debt of both. "Which will love the man more?" Jesus asks. This, I have learned, is a juridical parable, a "gotcha" parable, a parable that causes the listener to judge herself. You can tell that Simon is irritated. "I suppose," he begins officiously, "the one who owed the most." "Right you are," says Jesus and then asks Simon if he sees the woman. I love this move! It is as if Jesus is saying, "Now do you see the human being who has joined us at the table, this forgiven child of God? And as we see her through the eyes of him who has already forgiven her, we begin to see love and gratitude: evidence of the aftermath of forgiveness.

Still the church did not see, and imposed "satisfactions" to follow absolution, leaving the penitent anxious and unsure if she could every do enough. The Reformers countered with the insistence that remission of sin calls for nothing at all but love and gratitude. "By [his] words," writes Calvin, "as you see, [Jesus] does not make her love the cause of forgiveness, but its

proof.” Like the forgiven debtor, it was not that his debt was forgiven because he loved much; he loved much because his debt was forgiven. “In these searching reflections on the troubled conscience and free, unmerited forgiveness,” writes Brian Gerrish, “one reads the common spiritual experience and the deep pastoral concern out of which the Reformation was born.” Our love of God does not merit forgiveness; rather the God in whom there is forgiveness begets in us the aftermath of forgiveness which is first the love of God.

A second evidence of the aftermath of forgiveness involves a word not used much in liberal theological circles. The word is regeneration and it puts the aftermath of forgiveness more radically. When the unconditional love that is forgiveness disarms us, when we stop thinking about all the things we need to do in order to justify our sorry selves because it finally hits us, like a ton of bricks, that the God who alone has the power to wipe the slate clean has forgiven us long ago, then something in us dies and something in us is born. It is as though the image of God--marred, deformed, almost wiped out East of Eden--is being formed in us again by the God who watches and waits like a Father that refuses to give up on us, like a Mother who will never let us go. Surely if you are a parent, you know this from the inside out, trust that the kicking against the pricks of a teenager or a young adult will one day find him saying to you, “How did you ever put up with me? Why did you not treat me as a hired servant?” No longer are we servants, says Calvin, but children of an indulgent father, children growing up in every way into Christ. In the second place, the aftermath of forgiveness is the gift of a whole new self.

But one last word must be said! For what is easy to miss in Luke is the social dimension of forgiveness, the aftermath that involves a person’s restoration to the community. “That Jesus’ fundamental concern in these verses is with this woman’s restoration to the community of God’s people,” says Joel Green “(and not with her individualistic experience of forgiveness or

assurance of divine acceptance) is suggested by the fact that she is presented as already behaving in ways that grow out of her new life. [In fact], Jesus addresses her with words usually reserved for the conclusion of miracles of healing: ‘your faith has made you whole’; and he sends her away ‘in peace.’” If you have ever known what it is to be excluded from a community, either by the community’s judgment against you or by your own guilt, you know the miracle of restoration, accomplished by God’s grace, which is the crowning aftermath of forgiveness.

“It is a hot summer morning in the rural community of Tyler, Alabama,” writes the minister of First Presbyterian Church Selma in a story I have been saving for such a sermon as this. “The humidity is oppressive as the blistering sun burns off the morning haze. About a mile off State Highway 80 (the site of the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery) is a secluded clearing where the 100-year-old sanctuary of the New Liberty Baptist Church once stood.

“An arsonist’s fire [had] burned the church building to the ground six months earlier, leaving only piles of ashes, charred timber, and the memories of a small, black congregation. With no insurance on the building, there seemed little hope of rebuilding....But on this August day, the ashes have been cleared and a new foundation is being laid...[Just] now the work has stopped. This morning is special because of the appearance at the work site of Chris Deer, the accused arsonist--a local youth and member of a Baptist church down the road. As the young man approaches the workers and congregation, the people gather around. He begins to apologize for his action, but breaks down in tears before he can finish....L.C. Pettway, pastor of New Liberty, steps forward and embraces Chris saying, ‘It’s OK, son, you don’t have to say anything else. We forgive you.’ Later,...defying the politics of hate and division, [the pastor and his congregation] appear in the court with Chris Deer and plead for leniency and a second chance.”

“Six months later,” the Presbyterian preacher goes on, “an overflow crowd gathers in the sanctuary for the rededication of New Liberty Baptist Church....More significantly, Selma and surrounding Dallas County, so long known to the world for racial strife, now join in worship--black and white, Presbyterian and Baptist, young and old--to celebrate a rebirth.

“As I stand in the sanctuary, I notice that it has two crosses. The first, in the front of the church, is a simple wooden cross, hand-crafted by a volunteer builder...representing the good news of forgiveness and of God's victory over death in Jesus Christ....In the back of the church...is another cross...made of the burnt timbers and ashes of the old church. No attempt has been made to hide the charring and scars of the fire or to make it pretty, this reminder of human folly and sinfulness, this symbol of the violence and suffering human beings bring upon one another.”

“Which one,” Jesus almost asks, “will love me more?” “I suppose,” says Simon, “the one who was forgiven more.” So say we all. “By grace alone,” I imagine Jesus thinking before he speaks, “you have judged rightly.” Thanks be to God.